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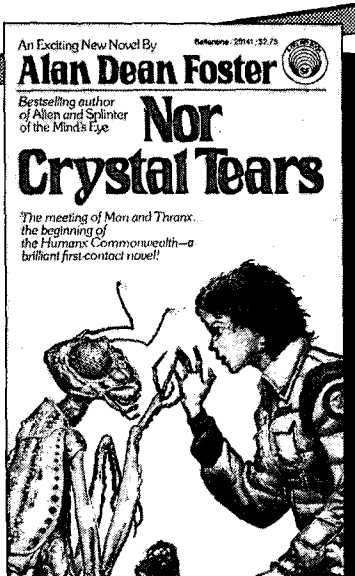
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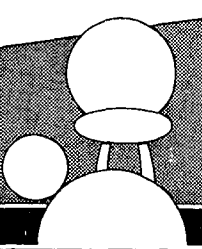

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Isaac ASIMOV's

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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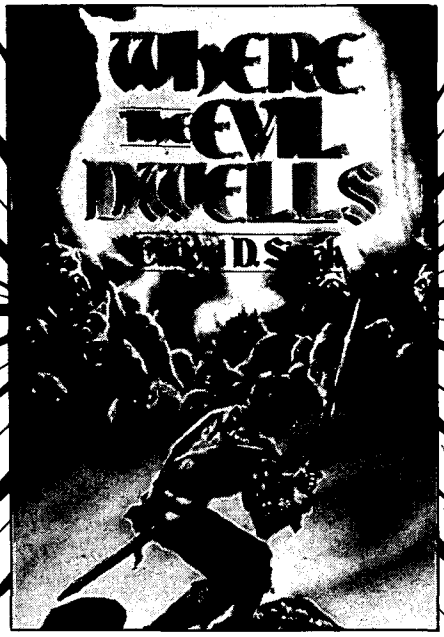
IN A LAND WHERE DREAMS COME TRUE —SO MUST NIGHTMARES...



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UP FRONT

by Kathleen Moloney

We're particularly pleased with this month's lineup of stories and features, which range from a very short, excellent story by Barry Malzberg to a very long, excellent story by John Brunner. Falling between these two are fine offerings by writers whose names are familiar to you—particularly Joan Aiken and Scott Sanders—and several by relative newcomers. The If-At-First-You-Don't-Succeed Award this month goes to Art Vesity, who has been submitting stories to *IAsfm* for several years and makes his first appearance here with "The First Day."

This month too we're introducing yet another new feature: the *IAsfm* Crossword Puzzle. Our search for a skillful crossword puzzler (or "cruciverbalist," as we vocabulary-builders have learned to call them) with a knowledge of the SF field came to an end when we found Merl H. Reagle. We discovered him in Santa Monica, California, living on the beach, pursuing a screenwriting career, and delighted at the prospect of combining two of his passions by creating puzzles for this magazine. Crossword puzzle fans have known his name for years; he has contributed puzzles to the *New York Times* and other newspapers and, more recently, to *Games* magazine.

Merl saw his first SF movie and created his first puzzle when he was five years old. The movie—a giant locust picture called "Beginning of the End"—scared him to death and made him a fan; the puzzle weaned him off Lincoln Logs and gave him a new hobby. By the time he was 15 he had been published by the *New York Times*, and he has never looked back. Now 32, he's still an enthusiastic SF reader and a renowned "constructor" (another new word). We'll publish a puzzle by him every month from now on. Merl loves talking about all aspects of puzzles, but he summed it all up by saying that a puzzle should be three things, in this order: entertaining, educational, and challenging. We hope you'll find that the puzzle—and the rest of the magazine—fits his description. ●

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EDITORIAL

NOT AN EXPERT

by Isaac Asimov

I suppose that it is only reasonable that people take it for granted that I am an expert on science fiction. I have written so much science fiction over so many years that it would seem I must be, especially since I have a magazine named for me.

That was the idea behind a recent invitation that I take part in the television series "Sunrise Semester." A series of programs was being given on computers, and I was asked to do one of them on the subject of "Computers in Science Fiction."

There was an agonizing pause while I cranked myself up to the pitch of making the admission. "I'm sorry," I said, "but I'm not really an expert on the subject and can't discuss it intelligently."

That was followed by another and clearly incredulous pause on the part of the young man who was doing the inviting. So I said hastily, and with some embarrassment, "I can discuss computers in *my* science fiction. I know about *that.*"

His face cleared, and he said, "Oh, well, that will be all right. Sure, we can discuss *your* science fiction."

And I was greatly relieved.

But you may be as puzzled as he was. How does it come about that I am not an expert on the subject generally? I'll explain.

There was a time, eons ago, when not much science fiction was being published and when I had nothing better to do with my time than read science fiction every chance I got. Of course, I had to do my schoolwork and I had to work in the family candy-store; but that was something to get through as quickly as possible, and *then* it was science-fiction time.

I read every issue of every magazine as it appeared. There were so few magazines and I was such a fast reader that I not only had time to read *all* the science fiction being published, but I also had time to catalog it.

I used three-by-five cards on which I listed each story, with author, issue of magazine, rating (0 to 10), and comments. I kept them carefully alphabet-

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ized and made separate listings of stories under the heading of authors' names, with additional listings of stories in categories 8, 9, and 10.

In those days, I *was* an expert and could freely have discussed any aspect of science-fiction writing and story content.

But then I began to write myself, and suddenly a great big portion of my time came to be given over to that. Even when I wasn't actually sitting at my typewriter, I was brooding over plots and story development. I found, to my surprise, I was falling behind. I was reading less carefully and abandoning stories if they didn't grab me from the start. (In the old days, I would painstakingly finish even the worst turkey, because I had to be able to rate them, didn't I?)

I put the matter to John Campbell, my great mentor in those days.

"Gee, Mr. Campbell," I said. "I don't read all the science fiction stories these days."

"What of it?" he asked.

"I'm worried that I won't know all the plots and developments being used and that I might unwittingly repeat some of them, not realizing they had been used."

"That's silly, Asimov," he said. "You just concentrate on writing *your* stories *your* way; and then, even if you duplicate an element in someone else's plot, no-one will particularly notice."

I took heart at that and continued to devote inordinate time to my writing. Just the same, I still managed, well into the 1950s, to read most of the science fiction that appeared.

Then two more developments took place:

First, the 1950s saw an enormous boom in science fiction. For a while, there were literally dozens of science-fiction magazines on the newsstands; and, in addition, hard-cover science-fiction books began to appear. It became literally impossible to read all of science fiction, unless you devoted a hundred percent of your time to it and read quickly—and perhaps not even then.

I did not even make the effort. Quite the reverse, in fact. In the mid-fifties I suddenly took to writing non-fiction in ever greater quantity and variety—which meant that more and more of my reading time had to be devoted to those fields in which I was now writing.

The result is that, since 1960 or so, I have been able to read only a small portion of the science fiction that has been published, and I have been falling steadily farther and farther behind. So it has come about that I am no longer an expert in the field of SF.

This, however, is not a situ-

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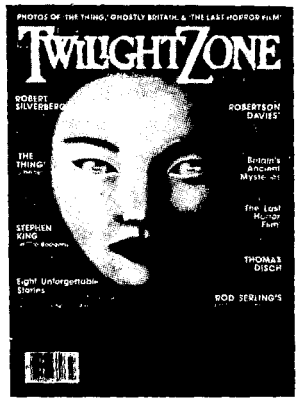

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ation unique to myself. No one, these days, can keep up with the field, or would even think of trying to do so, unless it were his job—unless he were a full-time science-fiction critic, collector, or anthologist.

Could *you* do it if you have a job, or other interests?

For instance, suppose you aspire to be a science-fiction writer, as I did in the late 1930s. That means that you, as I once did, would have to spend considerable time swatting away at writing, as I once did. How, in that case, would you keep abreast of the field in what time remains?

You couldn't—and you wouldn't.

And yet (you must be thinking) surely you will *have* to. One rule, in learning how to write, is to read the works of professionals and experts. Their stories are your school and they are your teachers. You *must* read science fiction.

Of course you must. But you don't have to read *everything*, especially since you can't. You must read selectively.

How do you select? Well, science fiction is not a smooth, undifferentiated, and homogenized field. There are, for example, novels on the one hand, and short stories on the other.

If you're a beginner, trying to break in, it makes sense to tackle the shorter pieces. For a

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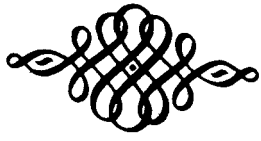
given investment in time, you can write a dozen short stories for each novel, try a dozen different ways of approaching a story, a dozen different moods, a dozen different sorts of plot, and so on. There would be time enough for the huge time-investment represented by a novel when you have more nearly mastered your craft.

Therefore, it makes sense to spend your possibly limited time reading short stories rather heavily. (I wouldn't forbid your reading a good novel now and then—but you've a serious course of study to undertake, and don't forget that.)

Where do you find short stories? —In anthologies and in magazines.

Both have their advantages. The anthologists cull out the best, presumably, and give you a concentrated handful of classics. On the other hand, the mere fact that the anthologized stories have been proved and tested means that they are anywhere from ten to forty years old and do not necessarily represent the present forefront of science-fictional thinking.

In magazines, you may be more likely to come across clinkers (in your opinion at least, if not in the editor's); but on the other hand, it is in the magazines where the experi-



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mentation is being done and where you can see what editors are buying *now*.

Does that mean I am making a pitch for *this* magazine? Yes, I am. If you've read this magazine at all, you will have noticed that we hang loose, that we're informal and friendly, that we rather enjoy being a home for talented beginners.

That doesn't mean that we don't also welcome distinguished graybeards such as Fred Pohl, Avram Davidson, Robert Silverberg, and Brian Aldiss.

Therefore, if you are a serious science-fiction reader, and (especially) if you are an aspiring science-fiction writer, this magazine that you are holding is something you should be reading. You can use us. —And I don't pretend that I am being utterly altruistic in this. *We* can use *you*.

—One more word before I go. You may not like every story in every issue. This is not because the editors are erratic and unreliable. It is because they search for variety. In the first place, readers' tastes vary; and in the second, science-fiction writing has grown and elaborated, so that different sub-disciplines ought to be represented.

For the aspiring writer this is particularly useful. The kind of stories you like are the kind of stories you should be trying to write. You should therefore value the variety, because it enables you, by example, to learn where your own talents may best lie. But don't decide too quickly. What you dislike at first taste may become delightful as familiarity grows.

So good reading. —And good writing. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Helliconia Spring
By Brian W. Aldiss
Atheneum, $15.95

The word *epic* is tossed around a lot these days and has been to a degree debased to mean "lengthy." We tend to forget that in an epic there should be evoked some sort of grandeur, and that it should be a story "dealing with or characterized by events of historical or legendary importance," as my dictionary puts it.

The epic of legend or history partially relies on what the reader brings to it, in those overtones supplied by general knowledge concerning the past or the future or the cultural milieu of the matters dealt with. An epic novel of the Crusades, for instance, will be the more "epic" because of our knowledge of the importance and scope of those conflicts, and their standing as major events in world history.

The author attempting a science fiction epic does not have that kind of sounding board to help him. He must create and evoke within the work itself any sense of grandeur and importance, and all too often the results are simply overlong rather than authentically important.

Brian Aldiss, in *Helliconia Spring*, has created a science fiction epic. It is a staggering work, dealing with staggering events. Its breadth and depth are rendered the more impressive in that it is only the first of three: *Helliconia Spring* is itself as grandiose as many trilogies.

The novel begins with one of the most impressive scenes of any I can remember in the genre, the migration of an immense herd of alien beasts, the caribou-like yelk. The landscape in which it takes place, in fact the entire planet, is wintry, snowbound, subject to boreal windstorms. The planet has two suns, which only twice a year rise and set together. The migration is watched by two primitive humans, father and son hunters; it takes over a day and a night and a "dimday," with only one sun in the sky, to pass their vantage point.

The herd is accompanied by other species of animals and an intelligent alien race, the phagors, who live with and on the yelk as the early Mongols lived on and with their horses, and are

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as fierce and warlike. They capture the older human and leave the boy, Yuli, to his fate in the wilderness. The first, shorter section of the novel is devoted to Yuli, whose wanderings eventually take him to Pannoval, a city built in a huge complex of caves. We get to know its culture (slightly higher than his own) through his eyes, and the Yuli section ends as he and several companions escape Pannoval's theocratic oppression through a trackless series of caverns.

At this point in the novel, the reader may well wonder where all this is going. Aside from the magnificent opening, Yuli's adventures have been engagingly picaresque, but little more. But this has simply been a prelude, setting the great stage of Helliconia.

The longer part of the novel is titled "Embruddock," which is the name of the village ruled by Yuli's descendants. It is now the fifth generation after him; we are given details of the intervening years and characters through the stories and legends of Embruddock. From there, we follow the tangled story of the community and its inhabitants through many years. But a greater story is also happening; the entire ecology of the planet is changing because of Helliconia's double sun system. The planet revolves around the lesser sun, Batalix, which revolves around the larger sun, Freyr. The "great year" of Freyr takes 2600 Terrestrial years; for centuries Helliconia has been in the winter of the great year, which has wiped out the advanced civilizations of the past. Now spring, biological and cultural, is about to break.

And above and beyond this, yet another level. Orbiting Helliconia, and observing in minute detail everything that happens on its surface, is an Earth Observation Station, the purpose of which I'm not about to give away here . . .

This extraordinarily deep and rich narrative is not without flaws. I had trouble with a subtheme involving the ghosts of dead ancestors clustered below the ground and visited by the women of the tribe. (The alien phagors have an equivalent rite.) These visits and conversations are presented so straightforwardly that it's difficult to judge whether they're to be taken as objective reality or trance-induced mythology. Something of the same applies to the system of land and air "octaves," paths and divisions that may have to do with magnetic fields and/or a special sense of the Helliconians, or are perhaps simply superstition.

Aldiss's characters have always been a problem; they consistently seem to lack humor, warmth, or any other qualities, in fact, that might involve the reader. It may be that Aldiss's

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"The RT-9000 will do everything but flick your Bic."

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people are drawn realistically and are therefore not the larger-than-life types we are used to in science fiction and fantasy. This works two ways in *Helliconia Spring*: while one wants epic heroes and villains to match this enormous canvas, the verisimilitude of the lives of these small, confused, and rather ordinary people we are given extends itself to the milieu and makes it the more convincing.

In spite of these reservations, the novel is a major work. Comparisons are usually odious — and unfair to both parties— but it must be said that Aldiss has created a cold *Dune*, with snow instead of sand (at least in this seasonal manifestation; it's clear Helliconia will be a different place when spring sets in). Not having been all that impressed with *Dune* to start off with, I think this newer work is the greater accomplishment.

Friday
By Robert A. Heinlein
Holt, Rinehart and Winston, $15.50

Friday is the lead character as well as the title of Robert Heinlein's latest novel. She is the Heinlein superwoman we have met before, Star of *Glory Road* without her Twenty Universes, Podkayne grown up.

Friday is a courier for an organization in a near future rife with organizations—mostly of a mysterious nature—that specialize in intrigue, assassination, and skullduggery. This is partially because the world, America in particular, has been Balkanized, split into a myriad of little nations. Wales is independent, as is Quebec. The American West is the California Confederacy; Chicago and its environs, the Imperium. There are also amorphous corporate states, located nowhere geographically but wielding great power.

Friday is young, intelligent, opinionated, and a raving beauty, judging by the reactions of most of the other characters, though she modestly claims only a great bod (the story is told in the first person). She is also an AP, an Artificial Person: not a robot or even really an android except in the broadest sense, but a being designed by genetic engineering from human genes. She has enhanced strength, reflexes, and senses. Raised in a crêche for Artificial Persons, she is defensive and feels inferior to "real" humans.

The story begins as Friday, returning from a mission, kills a man who is following her. She is then captured, subjected to gang rape, and tortured for the information she has been carrying. Rescued by her organization, she recuperates in New Zealand with her "S-group," an extended family of three husbands and four wives who do not know she is an AP. When this comes out in a quarrel over a daughter of the family marrying a Tongan, the family immediately divorces her.

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On the way back to the Imperium, where her organization is located, Friday picks up the captain of her semiballistic passenger craft, who takes her home at the end of her flight to his wife and her other husband in Winnipeg.

While she is there, a wave of assassinations and other terrorist activities occurs in several countries; the border to the Imperium is closed.

All this is simply the opening of the book, its first 75 pages. The rest of *Friday* is devoted to the heroine's episodic odyssey, in which she swims the Mississippi and becomes an unwitting host mother, among countless other perils. It culminates in her flight from a deep space luxury liner to a colonial planet, where she meets once again practically all the other characters in the book.

I've gone into this much detail about *Friday* to demonstrate that, while it shares many of the qualities of Heinlein's three most recent novels, it *does* have something like a plot and *does* move. It does not get bogged down in mountains of dialogue and diatribe, as they did. There is still a plentitude of dialogue, some of it pretty mushy (though there's a decrease in the number of people calling each other "dear," thank God), and it wouldn't be a Heinlein book without his pontificating. Here, though, it's balanced by an equal amount of event and action.

The major problem is still Heinlein's continued adolescent fantasy of liberated sex. Almost every halfway presentable character that appears tumbles happily and expertly into bed with Friday, including the women. (Paradoxically, Heinlein still seems almost puritanical about male homosexuality; chorus boys in Vegas "didn't smell right" to Friday's enhanced olfactory sense, which can detect sexuality.) There are no inhibitions, no possessiveness, no mature emotions connected with sex, and no discrimination. This rapidly becomes embarrassing and, eventually, almost ludicrous.

But—and it's a big but — despite my utter disbelief in the characters and their actions, this is the first new novel by Heinlein since *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* that I've read through without most of the time feeling that I was struggling through glue; I was carried along by, if nothing else, the Heinlein talent for endless inventive details, large and small, of a future milieu. *Friday* is not classic Heinlein, but it's a darn sight closer than we've been for a while.

The Silver Metal Lover
By Tanith Lee
DAW Books, $2.75 (paper)

Tanith Lee has eighteen books to her credit, and about the only generality one can make about her writing is that there is absolutely no predicting what the

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next one is going to be aside from well-written, sophisticated, and imaginatively fertile. Her latest, *The Silver Metal Lover*, is even more unexpected; it should be the sheerest romantic twaddle, given its subject matter; but somehow, in Lee's hands, it isn't.

Basically, it's an old, old theme, that of the inhuman creature given a soul through the love of a mortal. One remembers Ondine, la sylphide, the little mermaid, King Kong. Here the creature is a robot, the mortal a mother-dominated, insecure sixteen-year-old girl appropriately named Jane. The setting is a none-too-distant future, not so madly dizzy as the one Lee evoked in .her hilarious and poignant "Sapphire Wine" duo, but with something of the same off-the-wall and out-of-the-woodwork quality.

In this one, the Earth has acquired a new satellite, an asteroid, which managed to wreak havoc with most of the planet and wipe out a good part of its population. Most of what's left lives marginally among the ruins. But technology advances nonetheless, coming up with such things as Jane's mother's house, Chez Stratos, which "floats" among the clouds, and a new line of robots, which, unlike previous servomechanisms, are humanoid, beautiful, intelligent, and skilled in the arts, including sex.

The story mostly consists of girl meets robot, girl loses robot, girl gets robot (though it doesn't quite end there). It's the characters that make it work. Jane is as engaging as she is silly, and one cheers when she walks out on her mother and Chez Stratos to live with her silver metal lover in the ruined slums of the inner city. And Silver, the robot, somehow convinces as he changes from automatic pleasure-provider to concerned being, due to some flaw in his manufacture.

The peripheral characters are equally diverting. Jane's friends are as rich and useless as she but a good deal more malicious and/or actively eccentric. There's Egyptia, for instance, just doing her first acting role and living the part constantly; since it's that of a pseudo-Greek tragedy queen that makes Medea look like Mary Poppins, this is little help to Jane. And there's Clovis, who keeps acquiring lovers and then trying to get rid of them, usually with an electronically rigged Ouija board that predicts dire events.

Tanith Lee has another winner in *The Silver Metal Lover*. It's an aluminum soufflé that's both amusing and touching.

Second Nature
By Cherry Wilder
Timescape, $2.75 (paper)

Cherry Wilder would seem to have had an excess of ideas for *Second Nature*, all of which she dumps on the reader as soon as possible. In the prologue, we are

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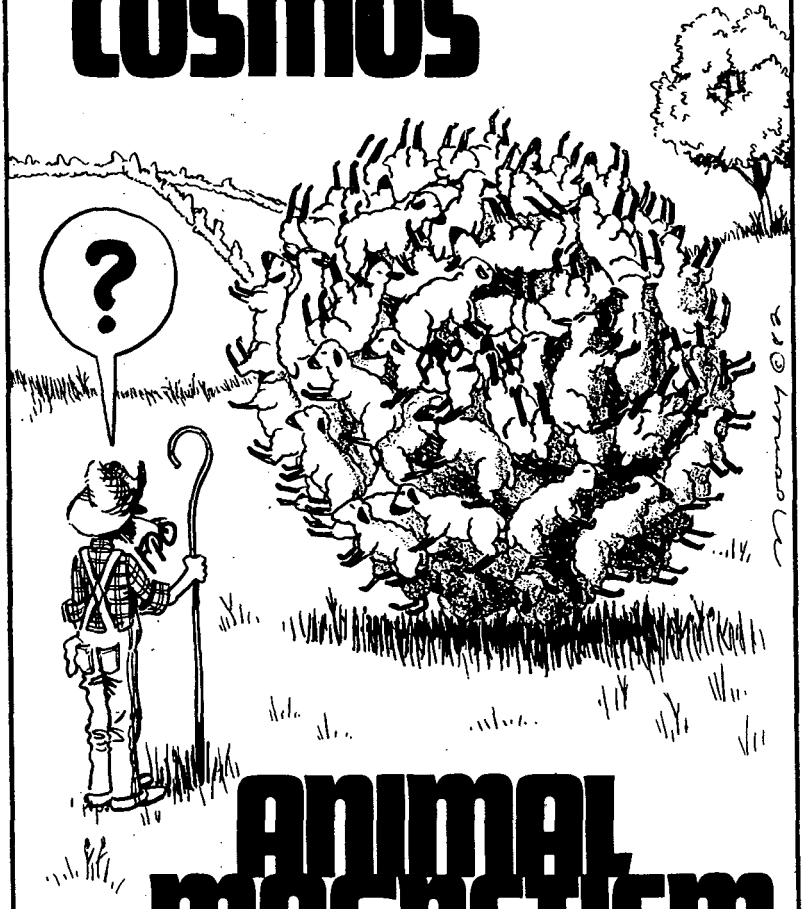
THE GAUE OF THE COSMOS



ANIMAL MAGNETISM

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immediately confronted with the encounter, on another world, of an alien and a human, told from the alien's point of view, interpolated with fragmentary paragraphs of another and completely irrelevant scene aboard a sailing ship. We are next plunged into the middle of a culture developed on this world over several centuries by the survivors of an interstellar vessel (human). They have been aided by the alien intelligences of this world, who have in the meantime been lost, have strayed, or have been stolen. We are then bombarded with characters (someone known as the Envoy, for unexplained reasons; her hermaphodite child, an intern in the medical caste; a prophetic servant; a brawling prospector with amnesia; a rising Messiah; and concepts, almost none of which are explained or explored.

By the time a *second* spaceship crash lands, I was thoroughly at sea, and I spent the rest of the book trying to work out who was who and what was what. The plot, in the meantime, went by the wayside. Wilder's ideas are certainly not uninteresting, but she would do well to expend more effort in communicating them coherently to her readers.

The Science Fiction Design Coloring Book
By Brad Hamann
Stemmer House Publishers, $2.95 (paper)

Gone are the days when science fiction was confined to the printed page; we are now assaulted daily with SF paper dolls, SF cereal boxes, and, for all I know, SF plastic slip-covers. Every once in a while, though, a novelty comes along of more than routine interest; such a one is *The Science Fiction Design Coloring Book*.

Brad Hamann is a young artist whose work has appeared in *Analog* and *Twilight Zone Magazine*; he knows science fiction, and he has provided a valid science fictional background for the visuals in an introductory exposition and description of the plates. The conceit is that these are the adaptations of sketches from an anthropological and archeological expedition to previously unexplored Zantee VII, a planet in "the stellar backwaters of the Scorpion Nebula."

So what we are given to color are scenes and artifacts from Zantee VII, presented just slightly tongue-in-cheek. Hamann's style for the drawings is neo-Deco, with broad areas just crying to be filled in by an old Crayola hand like me. If you have outgrown that sort of thing, this book would make a swell gift for an artistically inclined young person with an interest in science fiction.

And here are a couple of books recently published by those connected with this periodical:

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The Complete Robot
By Isaac Asimov
Doubleday, $19.95.

Isaac Asimov's Near Futures and Far
Edited by George Scithers
Dial Press, $10.95.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, NY 10014.

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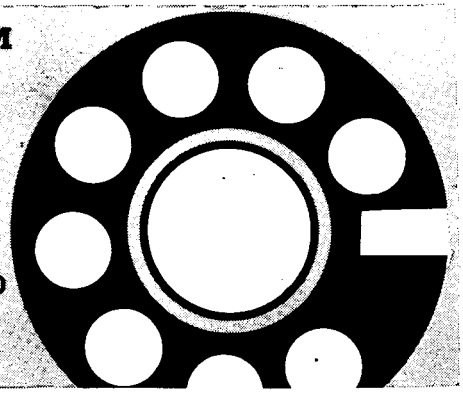

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IAsfm Puzzle #1

by Merl H. Reagle

NOW PLAYING

ACROSS

1 Henri's house
5 Finished a cake
9 SF overpopulation film, 1972
12 "The Stepford _____"
14 Silver streaks?
16 He played Doc Savage
17 The author
19 California's Big _____
20 Stanislaw Lem classic
21 Rural denial
23 Last letter
24 F. Scott's lady
25 The story (continues at 44 Across)
32 Gem
33 Estrada's TV org.
34 Ford or Pyle
35 From _____ Z
36 Emulated Lorelei
39 Mach-ing bird?
40 Shell
42 Hesitation sounds
43 "Star Trek" character
44 See 25 Across
48 A Musketeer
49 Mao's successor
50 Under control
53 Drillmaster?
57 Columbus campus
58 The movie
60 Turk's hat
61 Devoured
62 Researcher's dish
63 Cutting tool
64 Shockers of the deep
65 Wander

DOWN

1 Puzzles such as this: abbr.
2 Part of a Seven Dwarfs refrain
3 Powerful force in SF?
4 Author of "The Courts of Chaos"
5 Types
6 Food fish
7 Like movies on TV
8 Symbolic stick-ons
9 Enthusiasm; verve
10 Additional word?
11 Rocket stabilizer
13 Fathered
15 Landed wrong, perhaps
18 Only U.S. president with a Greek letter in his name
22 Rod Serling's job on Cousteau's shows: abbr.
24 Black leather jacket features
25 Large constellation
26 "_____ the Silent Planet," C.S. Lewis novel
27 Have _____ to pick
28 Resistance measure named for a German physicist
29 Follow
30 Theater thruway
31 _____ with (encountered)
36 TV
37 Prefix for three
38 Geometric-fantasy illustrator M.C.
41 Dressed
43 He plays Kirk
45 Lobster claws
46 So far
47 Dawn

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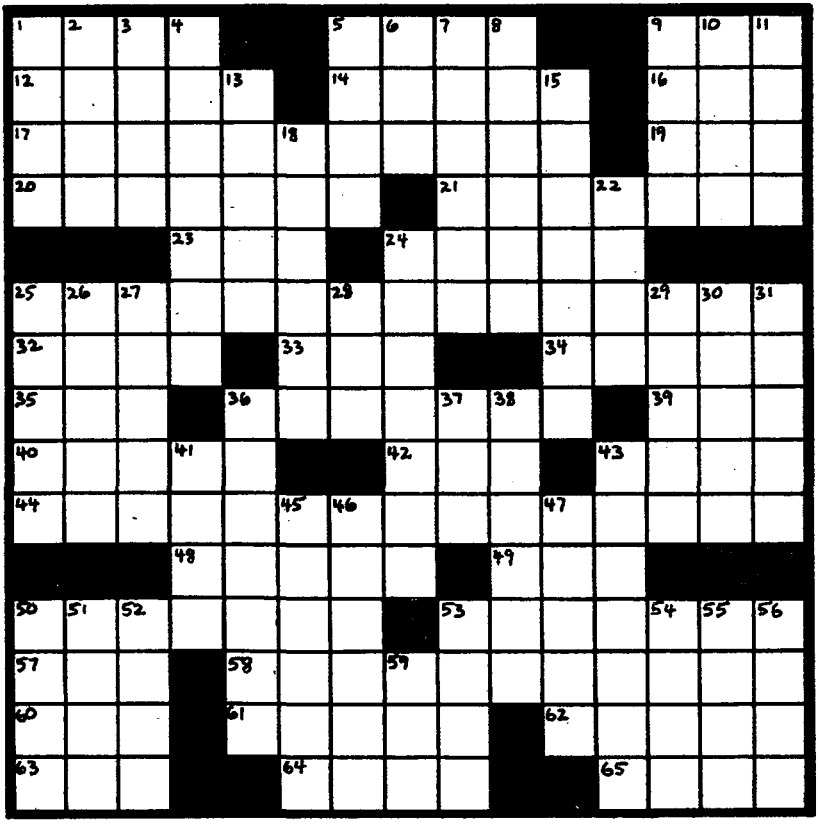
Solution on page 103

50 Divan
51 Avoided waste
52 Astronaut Aldrin
53 Studies at home?
54 A big fan of
55 Antitoxins
56 In shape
59 Actress Dolores _____ Rio



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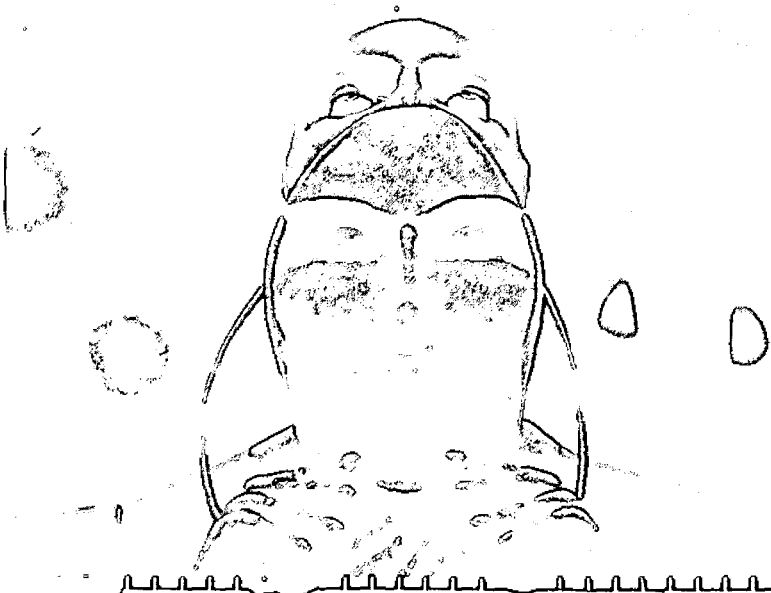

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MARTIN GARDNER

VALLEY OF THE APES

"My dear Lulu, how would you like to live for a few years in equatorial West Africa?" asked Dr. Fanzine Patterfanny, Stanford University's expert on ape languages.

Lulu, one of Miss Patterfanny's most intelligent gorillas, pondered the question for several minutes while she paced back and forth. Finally she signed: "It would be a welcome change from this lousy cage, beloved Fan. When do we start?"

Dr. Patterfanny's purpose in sending Lulu to Africa was to see if Lulu could teach sign language to a tribe of gorillas that lived in a large valley of the Congo. The experiment was a great success. In three years the apes not only had learned how to sign, but they had modified ASL (American sign language) so drastically, and added so many new signs, that when Miss Patterfanny returned to the Congo, she had enormous difficulty understanding the new language.

To convey some notion of Luluish (as the new language came to be called), here is how three simple phrases are signed:

Eat red ant: Turn a back flip, scratch left eyebrow, thumb nose.

Big red berry: Poke pinkie in right ear, thumb nose, stick out tongue.

Eat berry quick: Raise left foot, turn back flip, poke pinkie in right ear.

Given this information, how would you sign the phrase "Big ant" in Luluish?

The answer is on page 71.

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"The other" Burroughs, an innovator in his work–and his life

PROFILE

WILLIAM BURROUGHS

by Charles Platt

It is William Burroughs I'm concerned with here. Not Edgar Rice Burroughs, who created Tarzan and wrote all those well-loved science-fiction novels about John Carter of Mars. No, *William* Burroughs, whose surreal, drug-obsessed book *The Naked Lunch* was tried for obscenity, and whose recent *Cities of the Red Night* perpetuates his preoccupation with perverse fantasies and paranormal science. If it seems illogical for a science-fiction magazine to focus on this Burroughs rather than the other one, consider the source of our assumptions about what is science fiction and what is not.

Before World War II there were a lot of magazines publishing short stories in categories such as detective fiction, westerns, and romances. Each category used its own storytelling formula: the hard-boiled detective, the gunslinger riding into town, the young woman tempted by a dashing young man, and so on.

In 1926 Hugo Gernsback invented the science fiction category. Gernsback's writers quickly developed their own set of storytelling formulas, based on ideas borrowed from the books of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne: alien invasions (*The*

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PROFILE

"The space program is practically the only expenditure I don't begrudge the government. To my way of thinking, the only possible hope for the human species is to get into space..."

War of the Worlds), mad scientists (Captain Nemo in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*), super-weapons, plucky space cadets, and all the rest.

Since then, of course, some of science fiction has broadened its range and developed a more adult appeal. But paperback publishers and the visual media still see science fiction as a category, and still use the old formulas—just look at *Star Wars*. Consequently, when we think of what is or isn't science fiction, often we're thinking in terms of these formulas, when in fact a "fringe" writer such as William Burroughs, too nonconformist to be categorized, offers more of the surprises and creativity that are supposedly the reason we started reading science fiction in the first place.

Burroughs is an innovator not only in concepts but in writing technique; his "cut-up" system of scrambling text has earned him a reputation as a "difficult" avant-garde author. At the same time, the obscenity trial of *The Naked Lunch* gave him a lasting image as a "pornographic" writer, even though the book was judged not

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obscene and is not shocking by today's standards.

In fact, Burroughs's recent books are not difficult to read, and he is not concerned with sex or drugs in themselves but with fantasy and interpersonal control, in various forms dramatized via surreal or science-fictional images. Of his novel *The Soft Machine* he has said, "The book takes place, to a large extent, in a mythical area which bears some resemblance to South America and also to the planet Venus. It concerns, I should say, a struggle between controllers and those who are endeavoring to throw off control. . . . [Venus] has been a theme in science fiction for some time. And most writers have equated it with something like South America: a lush tropical scene teeming with poisonous, exotic life forms . . ."

His novel *Nova Express* describes aliens infiltrating Earth. Their invasion symbolizes all attempts of powerful groups to impose corrupt systems of oppression. "The purpose of my writing is to expose and arrest Nova Criminals," Burroughs writes metaphorically. "I show who they are and what they are doing and what they will do if they are not arrested."

Before visiting Burroughs at his New York City residence I prepared myself by reading *With William Burroughs*, a collection of taped conversations with personalities ranging from Lou Reed to Susan Sontag. I sensed in all these dialogues that Burroughs was very reserved or even withdrawn; my own interview began to seem an ominous prospect. Maurice Girodias, who first published *The Naked Lunch*, recalls: "Burroughs was very hard to talk to because he didn't say anything. . . . At this time he was living with Brion Gysin, and Gysin would do all the talking. . . . all three of us would sit on the bed—because there were no chairs—and try to make conversation. It was really funny. The man just didn't say anything. . . . I never had much editorial conversation with him, actually none. He'd just bring in the manuscript. . . . I think he was doing it to pay the rent. He really needed the money."

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PROFILE

At that time, in Paris in the 1950s, William Burroughs had little to live on. Though the giant Burroughs business equipment corporation grew from an adding machine invented by his grandfather, the family had long since sold out all its interest in the company. And twenty-five years after *The Naked Lunch* Burroughs is still by no means wealthy; he earns only small royalties from his work and lives modestly on The Bowery.

The Bowery at Houston Street: a classic New York scene. Ragged old men stagger up to cars at the stop light and panhandle for spare change, their faces reddened by chill wind and cheap wine, their palms grained with grime. Old newspapers and cigarette packs tumble in the wind. Kids smash bottles, set fire to a trash barrel, and run away hollering. Trucks roar-rattle-crash down the street, trailing clouds of dust and diesel fumes. It's a zone of burned-out tenements, subsiding storefronts behind rusty window gates, welfare hotels, and a couple of missions serving soup from God.

CBGB, the rock club where New York punk began, is located near here, mainly because punk ethos dictated an ostentatiously "honest" low-rent locale. Some brave, starving artists have moved here since nearby Soho became unaffordably chic, but it'll be years yet before gentrification alleviates the grimness and the grime.

Until then the Bowery's only retail trade is in secondhand restaurant equipment, sold out of run-down specialty stores offering everything from old pizza ovens to napkin dispensers. Burroughs himself lives above a place that deals in old-fashioned vinyl-padded diner chairs.

Burroughs emerges from a large green-painted steel door adjacent to the store. His complexion is ghostly pale; he peers out into daylight like the caretaker from a mausoleum. He gestures for me to come inside and leads me slowly up a flight of dusty wooden stairs, into the place he refers to dryly as "The Bunker," which is his home.

The floor is of concrete, painted white. Likewise the

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ceiling and the walls. There's only one window, and that's been boarded up. Fluorescent tubes cast a pallid light. This vast, empty place was once an athletic club's changing room. All the lockers have been stripped out, and hardly any furniture has been substituted.

Burroughs leads me to a kitchen area. Our footsteps echo across the concrete floor as though we are walking through a huge cellar. We sit at the table near a sink unit which has been installed in makeshift fashion. From this vantage point the rest of the space recedes into the distance. The only other furniture that I can see is a gray steel desk on which stands an old gray office typewriter, over against the far wall.

Burroughs turns out to be almost as difficult to talk to as I had feared. He is very polite and perfectly willing to tolerate my presence for as long as I wish to stay, but many of his remarks are dismissively brief, as if the questions bore him. He smokes a succession of Player's Navy Cut cigarettes, moves his hands and arms in awkward nervous mannerisms, fidgets in his chair, and several times gets up, walks to and fro, then sits back down again while he continues talking. He's nearing seventy, and the years show in the lines on his face, but he has a powerful, assertive voice. Typically he makes a brief, categorical statement, then stops and regards me with his pale eyes, as if waiting to see if I really intend to ask any more dumb questions.

I begin with science fiction. He has clearly used aspects of it in his work. Does he read much of it? Does he enjoy any of it?

"Writing science fiction is very difficult. Very few writers ever manage to convince you that this or that ever could have happened. Usually you'll find just a few paragraphs; if you find a good chapter, that's a very good science-fiction book."

I ask him for an example.

"Henry Kuttner's *Fury* — which is out of print, and Henry Kuttner's dead, and they reprinted all his work except the one good thing that he did." Burroughs pauses. "Eric Frank Russell is pretty good. A lot of science-fiction writers, you

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PROFILE

"**Innovation** in medical research is stifled by the way large organizations are set up. The more expensive your project is, the better, from the scientist's point of view. They may think they are looking for a cure, but they are not..."

know, produce just a few good sentences. . . . Fred Saberhagen is very good on sword and sorcery. But he's just written another one that I can't read—I couldn't read beyond the first page." Another long pause. "H. G. Wells's stuff still stands up pretty well."

If this seems a peculiar mix of rather old-fashioned authors, it's because Burroughs reads to feed his own particular obsessions. He describes Eric Frank Russell's *Three to Conquer*, for instance, as "One of the better 'virus' books." Burroughs has a special interest in viruses as a form of quasi-life that invades a person much as heroin takes over the metabolism of an addict, or totalitarianism takes over the mind of a citizen. In Burroughs's world, viruses are a metaphor for psychological or physiological control.

In *Nova Express*, for example: "Without hesitation K9 gave the order: 'Release Silence Virus—Blanket area'—So The Silence Sickness flashed round the world. . . ." Or, earlier in the novel, in one of its laconic, comic scenes: "So I walk in on this Pleasantville croaker and

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tell him I have contracted this Venusian virus and subject to dissolve myself in poison juices and assimilate the passers-by unless I get my medicine and get it regular—So I walk in on this old party smelling like a compost heap and steaming demurely and he snaps at me, 'What's *your* trouble?'

" 'The Venusian Gook Rot, doctor.' "

This kind of ironic and multi-levelled writing is a long way from conventional science fiction, which must be one reason that Burroughs is so out of sympathy with much of it, even though he draws upon its ideas.

Another less obvious reason is that he has little interest in conventional space travel. "All they're contemplating, and all they have accomplished, is travelling in an aqualung," he says.

I ask if he's against the space program.

"No, it's practically the only expenditure I don't begrudge the government. Even to have gotten out there in an aqualung was a great accomplishment. But to my way of thinking, the only possible hope for the human species is to get into space and accommodate themselves to space conditions."

Is he implying we should adapt human beings to live in space without life-support systems?

"Absolutely. It's quite as drastic a step as leaving water for land. Whether it'll be made or not is another question, but if it isn't made, that's it. Any species comes to an end; they've got certain potential, to carry them so far, and then there comes a point to mutate or die. We've reached that point. I think a lot of our sociological chaos really is reflecting a biological crisis, the fact that we're near the end of the line. But you see, if you've got creatures living in water, looking up, they can't, of course, imagine clearly what it's like to be up there, to be out of the water, in a different dimension. There are going to be whole new fears—the fear of falling, for instance, has no meaning for a fish, but as soon as he gets up on land, it will.

"They must have the air-breathing potential before they can move, so to my way of

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thinking space research should be directed toward effecting biological alterations in the human structure that would make it more suited to space conditions. That's the first step."

I object that we've got to have oxygen in some form.

"Well, that's what we say, but there's no prerequisite."

There isn't? In that case, he's talking about rather substantial modifications.

"Oh, absolutely. Very drastic modifications."

And psychological modifications, too.

"Everything is both biological and psychological; everything is both instinctive and emotional. There's no line there at all. That's one of the errors of Western thought, this 'either/or' thinking. Korzybski [originator of General Semantics] points that out, and really should be required reading for everyone. All these 'either/or' lines are completely erroneous. Like internal and external: all phenomena are *both* internal and external.

"Of course, you've read Monroe's book *Journeys Out of the Body*? That's a step in the direction of adaptation. You see, one of the most important limitations is weight. Weight, and then on top of that, having to transport the whole environment, around something that's fairly heavy to begin with—the human body. Well, we have, here, a model body that's much lighter, perhaps pretty nearly weightless, and that's the astral body, the dream body, and Monroe's done quite a lot of research along these lines. He has some machines to facilitate leaving the body."

In Burroughs's books he has a penchant for dry, almost deadpan humor; but talking about astral bodies, he seems quite serious. I ask him if he really believes that out-of-body experiences happen.

"Of course, it happens all the time. It happens every night, for example, in dreams. We now know that dreams are a biologic necessity. They're showing us the direction in which we're going, and some hints as to how to get there."

But—taking this seriously—if space travel were to be done by "astral bodies," no biological adaptation would

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be necessary. The physical body could stay back home and sustain itself.

"Yes. But there comes a time when it doesn't. So Monroe's done a lot of work with dying people. So it won't be such a shock. He gets them accustomed to living outside of the body."

I decide to try to bring things back to a more material level. Does Burroughs like the idea of space colonies?

"Sure, why not? It'd be a step in the right direction." He shrugs.

Would space colonies, in his view of things, revitalize the human spirit?

"Undoubtedly. Eventually people will have to think in these terms—if they have time."

He seems to have lost interest in the subject. I decide to try a different tack altogether. Has he been troubled, over the years, by readers complaining that his books are hard to understand, or difficult?

"They have to tell me what they think is 'difficult' and why," he says flatly. "What it means is what's there. Salvador Dali, when asked what his pictures mean, just points to his pictures. I do the same thing. It means what is there, that's all. If it doesn't mean anything to you, then it just doesn't mean anything to you, that's all."

This prompts me to ask about the "cut-up" system, which Burroughs used in many of his earlier books in response to a suggestion from artist Brion Gysin. In the "cut-up" method a writer takes a normal, coherent piece of prose—a page of his own manuscript, or a paragraph of someone else's work, or both—and chops the text arbitrarily into pieces a few words long. These pieces are then reassembled at random, resulting in prose like this from *Nova Express*: "Explosive fragrance—Love between light and shadow—The few who lived cross the wounded galaxies—Love?—Five years I grew muttering in the ice—Dead sun reached flesh with its wandering dream—"

"It's closer to the actual facts of perception," Burroughs explains, referring to the scrambled way in which our thoughts actually occur, hop-

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PROFILE

"**Space** research should be directed toward effecting biological alterations in the human structure that would make it more suited to space conditions. That's the first step."

scotching from everyday experiences to fragments of childhood memory to speculations on what may happen tomorrow, and back again. "I'm talking about how things are actually perceived by the brain. When Cézanne's pictures were first exhibited, people didn't even realize that this was a lemon or a fish seen from a certain angle in a certain light; they didn't even see it. Now any child will see what it is. So the function of art and creative thought I think is to make people aware of what they know, but don't yet know that they know. And this always upsets a certain number of people; they don't want to be made aware. But then over a period of time, it becomes common knowledge, and the expansion of awareness is accepted."

I tell Burroughs that this sounds plausible, yet it seems to me that public receptiveness for experimental fiction has diminished over the years.

"That depends, of course. Certainly best sellers are usually written in the old nineteenth-century novel tradition, which has nothing to

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do with the facts of perception. The omniscient author, and all that, is a form quite as arbitrary as the sonnet. And it's still very widespread. But I mean, good heavens, we've had Joyce, Gertrude Stein—all these verbal innovators have certainly had an effect.

"Just the same thing has happened in painting. Painters had their whole representational position knocked out from under them by photography. One of the first things they did was the equivalent of the cut-up in painting: the collage, the montage. And then they've gone further and further than that, very far from representational painting indeed."

Large parts of Burroughs's most recent novel, *Cities of the Red Night*, are written in totally conventional prose, some of which apes the private-detective idiom. Does this indicate a break with his earlier work?

"No. There are passages written in much the same way in *The Naked Lunch*. Clem Snide is one of my old characters." He pauses. "And then the health officer is unmistakably written in the style of Graham Greene. There's quite a lot of Conrad in there."

Has Burroughs ever been tempted to try writing a book with real mass-appeal? A best seller?

He shakes his head. "All best sellers are written up to the limit of the man's ability. Something that people will immediately sense is that they're being written down to. You cannot do it. It isn't that I have any scruples; it's just that it doesn't work. I know how best sellers are written; there are two main formulas. One is The Menace. Challenge posed by the menace, removal of the menace. Like *Jaws*. It can be an epidemic, an alien invasion, nuclear holocaust, whatever. The other is Something That People Know Something About, and Want to Know More About. *The Godfather*, Inside Madison Avenue, Inside the Cosmetic Industry, etc. etc. etc. Those are the two main formulas.

"I think *Cities of the Red Night* has sold quite well. I think it will be as financially

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successful as *The Naked Lunch*. A lot of my books didn't do anything financially. *The Job* was a complete financial failure."

Was that hard to take, over the years?

"Well, no. I mean you have to adjust yourself. I managed to get by, and when I came back to America [in the 1970s], I started doing a lot of readings, and that has carried me; about half of my income comes from that source. I couldn't live on books alone—at least, I haven't been able to, up to now. But I hope that I will be able to, because I want to give all of my time now to writing. I'm getting tired of performing."

Cities of the Red Night is to some extent an alternate-universe novel, in which the Americas are settled by utopian colonists in small communes allowing total equality and liberty. Burroughs explains in his introduction that the idea comes from "Libertatia," a real colony established by a pirate captain in the 18th Century. "There were other such colonies in Central and South America, but they were not able to maintain themselves, since they were not sufficiently populous to withstand attack. Had they been able to do so, the history of the world could have been altered. . . . Imagine such a movement on a world-wide scale. Faced by the actual practice of freedom, the French and American Revolutions would be forced to stand by their words."

I ask his views about contemporary U.S. politics. Since he is concerned about liberty versus oppression, is he pessimistic?

"Pessimism is a word that doesn't do much for me. Pessimism and optimism are really meaningless words. I mean, if the captain says the ship is sinking, is he a pessimist? Well, if it isn't sinking, perhaps. You see, I'm not concerned with politics at all. I feel when things get on a political level, it's all really pretty hopeless. I'm not interested in politics at all, or political solutions."

One of the main themes in *Cities of the Red Night* draws upon the work of Wilhelm Reich.

"I think Reich's cancer theory is extremely valid and has, in

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fact, been stated word for word by a doctor connected with the space program, with no acknowledgment of Reich. If you have a cell with a high electrical potential at the surface, it's a noncancerous cell. When the electrical charge at the surface gets below a certain level, then the cell is suffocating, and you get a precancerous condition. That's exactly what Reich said, and the orgone accumulator was an attempt to raise the electrical potential of the cell at the surface, and could probably be carried much further with magnetic iron. Doctors have said that cancer can't exist in a strong magnetic field. So there is a lot of very valid material there, which nobody has ever used."

Burroughs himself has owned and used an "orgone accumulator," a box designed by Reich to gather "orgone energy" from the cosmos and focus it on the user sitting inside.

"I think it does have some effect on cancer, and anything that's anticancerous will tone up the system in general. Pyramid-shaped accumulators, magnetism—I think there are many possibilities there."

I remark that I find it hard to believe in pyramid power.

"I don't find it difficult to believe that energy can be concentrated by shapes, and particularly in magnetic fields, because in a sense what animates the human body *is* a magnetic field, and I think there's a strong possibility the whole answer to cancer is right there. But there's no experiment going on, certainly not in any conventional cancer research. Innovation is stifled by the way large organizations are set up. The more expensive your project, the better, from the scientist's point of view. The way in which appropriations are assigned militates against finding a cure. They may think they are looking for a cure, but actually they are not, they are looking for a way to perpetuate themselves and their particular department, whether it's accomplishing anything or not."

Most science fiction authors play with concepts (such as UFOs) that in real life they do not take very seriously. Burroughs, however, seems

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absolutely serious about all the concepts in his work. As he says, he sees no divisions—no "either/or"—and is therefore so open-minded as to seem misguided to those who reject "crank" theories.

But Burroughs's genius is in his wide-open receptiveness—his sensitivity to image, nuance, and metaphor, and to undercurrents in psychology and social systems. Just as he is probably the only author to have contrived fine prose via the use of drugs, he is one of the few to have synthesized a coherent message from weird ideas about altered states of consciousness and orgone energy. As he puts it, in his afterword to *The Naked Lunch*: "There is only one thing a writer can write about: *what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing*. . . . I am a recording instrument. . . . I do not presume to impose "story" "plot" "continuity." . . . In so far as I succeed in *Direct* recording of certain areas of psychic process, I may have limited function. . . . I am not an entertainer."

He didn't even set out to be a writer. "I didn't write anything till I was thirty-five. Then, when *Junky* was published, that gave me encouragement, and I went on from there. The writing of *The Naked Lunch* took place over a period of five or six years or more, as a series of sketches. Maurice Girodias in Paris wanted to publish it, I had to get it ready in about three weeks, and there were about six or seven hundred pages of notes, some material that was finished and some of it partially finished, so I just made a sort of an arbitrary selection, and that was the book."

He mentions that his next novel will deal with guerrilla warfare. Before I leave, he shows me back issues of *Guns and Ammo* magazine that he's been reading for research and a modern, sophisticated blowpipe and darts, for "silent assassination." On one of the concrete walls of The Bunker are life-size posters of enemy agents. The posters have been used as targets in handgun practice. They are perforated with large bullet holes.

I ask him if he has any parting message for science

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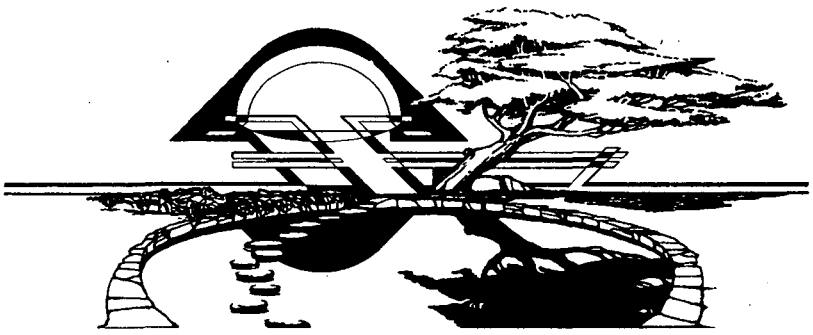
fiction writers. "Well, it's up to them what they do. I can't dictate. It has seemed to be an area where they had far-out ideas, but the way in which they developed the ideas was pretty conventional.

"Dreams and fantasies are quite as real as what we see around us—simply a different level of reality. As we now know, dreams are as necessary to us as food. We die without them."

On this note I depart, leaving him alone in The Bunker, the strange, echoing, windowless retreat where his dreams are made. ●

Charles Platt, formerly editor of *New Worlds,* an influential English SF magazine of the late '60s and early '70s, now resides in New York City. He is the author of *Dream Makers* (Berkley, 1980), a volume of profiles of writers of imaginative fiction. The preceding profile will appear in *Dream Makers II,* to be published by Berkley in the spring of 1983.



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TWO RACES

by Joan Aiken

art: Val Lakey Artifact

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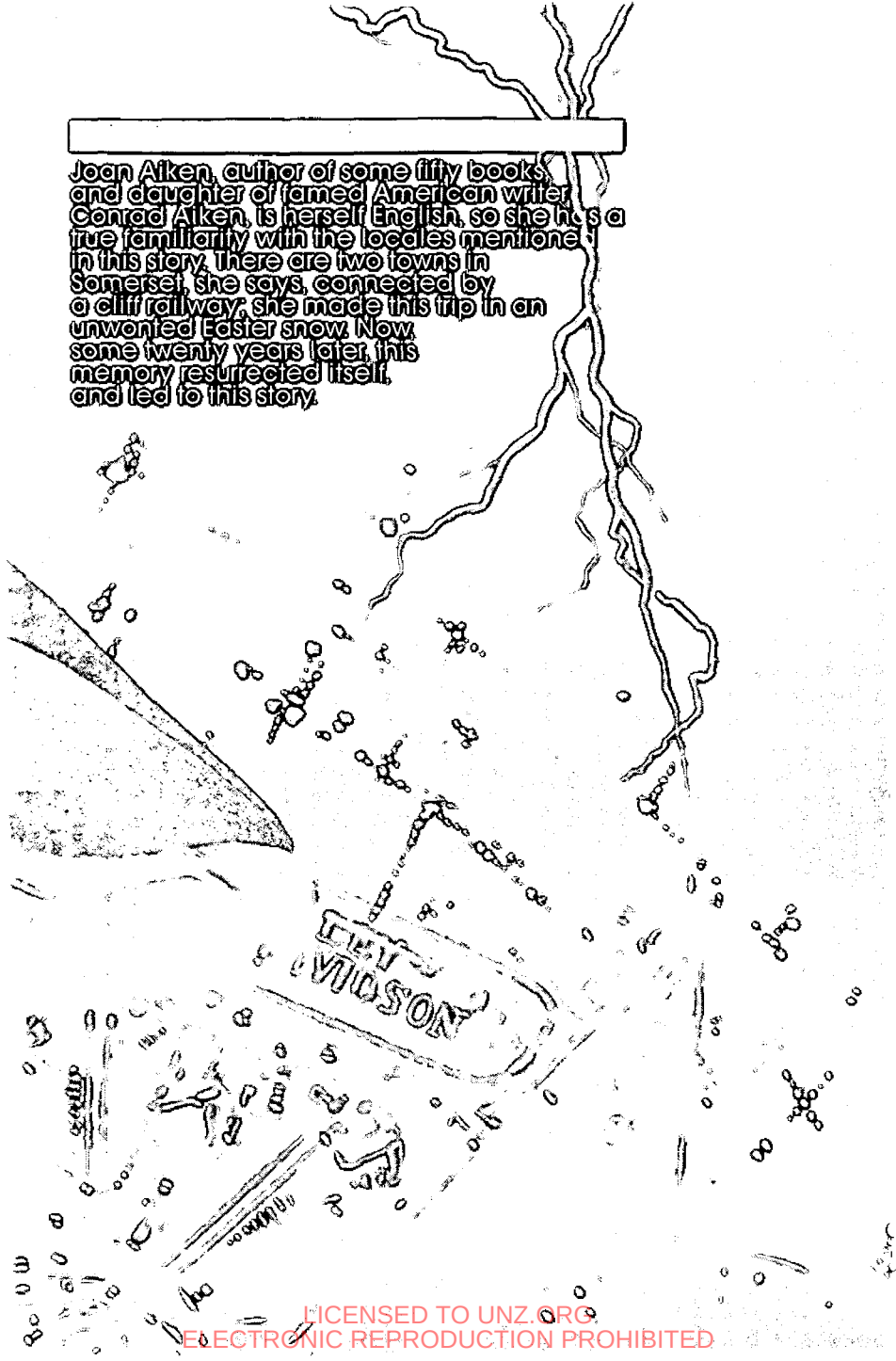
Joan Aiken, author of some fifty books, and daughter of famed American writer Conrad Aiken, is herself English, so she has a true familiarity with the locales mentioned in this story. There are two towns in Somerset, she says, connected by a cliff railway; she made this trip in an unwonted Easter snow. Now, some twenty years later, this memory resurrected itself, and led to this story.

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The year was 1930, and the month was April; it had been a bitterly cold, wild, gale-racked season, and the Brittany moors were still patched with snow as Inspector Vidame's train made its leisurely way toward the coast, stopping at ever smaller places along the way. At last, looking out, he saw the sign ZINZAC-MONT and prepared to alight. His final destination was Zinzac-Plage, but the railway did not go that far.

"Can I get a taxi?" he asked the stationmaster, but the man shook his head.

"The road is too bad, *monsieur*. We had a severe frost last night. No driver will risk it until the ice has melted on the hill. You will have to take the cliff railway."

"Direct me to it."

The stationmaster merely pointed. Beyond the station building lay a wide cobbled square with a few pointed, high-gabled buildings dotted round its perimeter, screened from each other by large trees. Directly across the square from the station a tiny gothic building enclosed by spiky iron railings bore the sign CLIFF RAILWAY.

Inspector Vidame walked over to it, shivering in the icy breeze, which felt and smelled as if it had traversed miles of snow-covered empty land. Brittany was a queer, primitive, cut-off place, he thought; the people looked different, not French; they had their roots back in a wilder, darker pre-Christian era.

Passing through the iron gates, he found a grim old lady at a *guichet,* paid the small fare she indicated, and asked where he should go. Like the stationmaster, she merely pointed, and he saw that he must step into a small, cabinlike waiting room.

"Taciturn lot," thought the inspector. "No wonder the local police made so little progress in the case."

Entering the cabin, he realized that he was, in fact, entering the rail-car itself: a glass-enclosed structure, perhaps eight feet square, equipped with wooden benches; below it, for its base, was a triangular tank, which was slowly filling with water from a conduit at the rear.

Looking out of the front window, Inspector Vidame was presented with a panoramic view of Zinzac-Plage three hundred feet below him at the foot of the cliff. The tiny port clustered on either side of a rocky torrent that rushed into the Atlantic, dividing around an island just large enough to contain three houses. This was connected by bridges to the river banks on either side. A mole enclosed a small harbor. Beyond it extended a snow-encrusted stretch of beach, and there were some of the trappings of a holiday resort—a bandstand, ornamental gardens, and wrought-iron benches. A few snow-laden

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palms shivered miserably in the wind.

Creeping up what seemed an almost vertical incline below him was the other cable car, and as Vidame noticed this, his own car began to move down. The system was primitive but effective—the bucket principle: as the tank of one car filled at the top, its weight made it start down, thereby hauling up the other car, which had emptied its tank at the bottom. There was a general air of damp, mold, moss, and running water about the contrivance. I do hope the cables are kept well oiled, thought the inspector; but the cliff railway had been running since 1890, a plaque at the top told him, so presumably the authorities in charge knew how to maintain it properly.

Halfway down, one car passed the other; the ride was slow, and as the cars were unheated and freezing cold, the inspector, the sole passenger, was relieved to step out at the bottom and thread his way through the narrow slushy streets of the lower town. Here he inquired his way to the house of Madame Dodman and was interested to note that the name evoked black looks. One man spat, a woman crossed herself, and two others would not speak but hastily went on their way.

The house he was looking for proved to be one of the three on the central islet. The inspector crossed a bridge over the river, which, fed by last night's snow, was hurling itself furiously toward the harbor, among boulders big as grand pianos. The air down here was dank and chill. From its north-facing aspect, Inspector Vidame guessed that Zinzac-Plage, huddled at the foot of the steep cliff, must lose the sun entirely for a proportion of the winter; no wonder its inhabitants seemed so surly and dour. What a place to live in! Nothing but rock, water, and overlush vegetation, which at the moment seemed half-dead, nipped by the untimely cold.

The inspector soon realized that he would learn nothing useful from Madame Dodman. She was a slack-faced, pale-eyed woman with wispy hair and a dirty apron. She ran a kind of guest house, but it was hard to imagine that anybody would wish to stay there, except, perhaps, in high summer, when its location on the island might have some appeal. Now, damp, bleak, and scantily furnished, it appeared wholly unattractive, like its owner. In fact, Inspector Vidame soon decided that the poor woman must be slightly feeble-minded, so haltingly and irrelevantly did she answer his questions. How could she ever manage to run a guest house? She seemed hardly capable of following a train of thought.

"It was your son who . . . vanished, Madame?"

"Ah yes, ah yes . . . poor boy . . . "

"How old was he?"

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"Eh?"

"How old?"

"Fifteen. But he was not one of the . . . He never had been . . . He had no . . . Of course boys never do . . . It is girls who . . . Ah, here is my daughter."

At this moment, as if summoned by some plea in the woman's voice, a girl came into the dismal room where they were talking. It was the dining room of the guesthouse; four small, oilcloth-covered tables and a number of spindly chairs gave a gloomy indication of the kind of food that one might expect to be served there. But the girl was in startling contrast both to the place and her mother. Tall and shapely, she moved with a smooth, fluid economy, so that although her actions did not appear to be fast, she seemed to travel from one point to another with great precision and rapidity. Her face was a pale, regular oval, and her hair was quite straight and dressed in a chignon, so black and smooth that it had blue lights in it. Her eyes seemed to be very large, but it was not possible to discover their color, for she wore tinted sunglasses, bluish and slightly opalescent, which reflected the light. They struck a note of incongruity.

"*Monsieur?* How can I serve you?" Her voice was level and quiet, smooth too, like everything about her.

"Daniella," said the mother helplessly, "he wants us to tell him . . . But what is there to tell?"

"They sent his hand. Wrapped in seaweed."

"His *hand?*" The inspector was appalled, but he tried to maintain an atmosphere of calm and reason. "Then perhaps—perhaps he is still alive? It is a threat, a kidnapping?"

But the mother shook her head. "No, A boy . . . a boy is of no value . . . "

"It was a threat," said the girl. "But he is dead. I know."

"Why? And who are *they?*"

"The Herons."

Following the direction of the girl's gaze, Inspector Vidame glanced out of the window, across the sodden little patch of snowy garden and the turbulent river. On the opposite shore, in the cobbled area by the bandstand, seven or eight men were standing. They did not wave or gesticulate. They merely stood, idle and disengaged. They did not seem to look toward the house, but nevertheless there was a decided air of menace about them. They wore grey overalls. They are only sailors, surely, waiting for the tide to turn, thought the inspector. Yet they made him uneasy.

"There has always been a war between the Herons and the Col-

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imaçons," said the girl. "Oh, it goes back . . . beyond the history books. In the caves there are pictures of their battles."

The mother began to cry, twisting her soiled apron. "But *he* was not one! Oh, why did poor Jacques . . . ? He was neither one thing nor the other."

In some remote corner of his brain, the girl's name had been fidgeting Inspector Vidame. It sounded familiar. Now he made the connection.

"Daniella Dodman. *La Daniella.* Did you not—forgive me—can it have been some relation—your grandmother, perhaps—who was a great cabaret *artiste?*"

"Yes, it was my grandmother," said the girl tonelessly.

"She performed in Paris before the Great War? Twenty, thirty years ago?"

"She was my grandmother," the girl repeated.

And what had there been about La Daniella? Something special, something remarkable. Slowly the details came back into Vidame's mind. Her act in itself was nothing out of the ordinary, but—yes, that was it—she always wore glasses, tinted glasses, all the time she was dancing. Or a black mask. And then—if you stayed very late, and paid an extra five hundred francs—what was it that she did? Vidame had read about it. He was fascinated by such stories. There was supposed to be some kind of risk attached—a curse—like those Japanese fish that are such a popular delicacy among the sophisticates of Tokyo. One in a hundred is deadly poison; if you eat it, you writhe in agony for three days, then die. But the other ninety-nine are so delicious that some people consider them worth the risk of dying. But what was it that La Daniella had done?

"Dodman?" he said. "That is not a Breton name, surely?"

"No, there was an English ancestor, from Cornwall. Though, of course," the girl said, "there has always been a connection between Cornwall and Brittany. The races are connected."

"So the name Dodman—"

"My grandmother never married," the girl said coldly.

Nor did your mother, thought the inspector, turning to look at Madame Dodman, *Madame* by courtesy, presumably, who had begun fretfully wiping the table tops with a damp rag. Why she bothered he could not imagine; it did not seem in the least probable that any tourists would come seeking lunches in such wintry weather, especially if the only access road to Zinzac was impassable with ice.

Wondering for the first time where the road was located, he looked out of the window again, over the open space where the grey-overalled youths loitered, above the roofs of the town, at the beetling

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hillside. Yes, there it ran, lacing back and forth over the snow-streaked rock—eight hairpin bends, one above the other, a marvel of road engineering. How had they managed to get into this place before the road was built? wondered the inspector. Perhaps there was another way around the coast, to Plouot-les-Pins.

The girl had followed the direction of his gaze to the road.

"On Easter night and at midsummer, they have a race," she said.

"The people here in Zinzac?"

"No. Only the Herons. Down the hill. On their motorbikes. Down, up, and down again. It is a race against the cable-car."

The skin on his head crept at the thought of taking those bends, crazily fast, on a motorbike, and at night. How many were killed every year?

"But surely," he said, "when there is ice on the hill, they cannot . . . ?"

"Ah, it was warm at Easter. That was before the snow came. They had been tarring the road. They do that every spring—"

By *they,* he gathered she meant the town authorities, not the mysterious group she called the Herons.

"And it was at Easter your brother disappeared?"

"On Easter morning he was gone. And the next day there was a sack on the doorstep with his hand in the seaweed."

"Could it be possible that he had taken part in the race? And had been killed—?"

"Oh, no. They would never allow an outsider. No, that is not how he died."

"But, *mademoiselle* . . . " the inspector began to feel irritated. This girl seemed so positive about the whole thing, as if she saw no reason for the law to come meddling.

Well, he supposed, from her point of view, the law could do little.

"But don't you want them punished?" he demanded.

"Oh, they will be punished," she said.

The mother looked out of the window to where a thrush was cracking a snail-shell on the edge of the concrete path—*thwack, crack! Thwack, crack*—and then methodically pecking out the contents.

"Nature is so cruel . . . " said Madame Dodman dreamily. "Big, small. The big always wins. The small always loses. But then one day there will come one bigger still. It is fair. In the end, a balance is kept. Some cat will eat the thrush."

It was the longest and most rational statement Vidame had heard her make.

"But, *mademoiselle,* you do think that your brother has been killed?"

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"I am certain of it."

"Why? What was the reason?"

The mother began to moan softly. "Oh, why did we ever come here? We should have stayed in Brest."

"Wherever you stay," said the girl, "they catch you in the end. If you have something they want, they come after you. Like the thrush."

But what is it that you have? the inspector wondered.

"Madame, mademoiselle," he said formally, "I have troubled you long enough. Will you be so kind as to direct me to the office of your local Agent of Police, Monsieur Thénard?"

"I will show you the way," said Daniella, picking up a basket. "I have to go out."

He reflected that she might be glad of his escort past the group of youths.

These, however, made no move or hostile gesture. Indeed, they remained unnaturally still, their attention trained entirely on the girl as she walked past them with dignity. When they were almost out of earshot, a voice chanted softly, derisively, yearningly, "Show us, show us, show us, Mademoiselle Colimaçon!"

Daniella took no notice of the voice except that her back straightened, her chin lifted, she looked rigidly ahead through her blue-tinted glasses.

"What do they want of you, *mademoiselle?"* asked Vidame. "What are they after?"

"You know what my grandmother did? You had heard about her performance? That is what they wish me to do for them."

Her voice was so cold and grim that the inspector shivered. If only he could recall the precise nature of La Daniella's act!

"But you will not?" he suggested.

"Do you think I would?" she said proudly. "They are the enemy! Unless—" she stopped, bit her lip, then added, "And—after what they did to Jacques?"

"Why do they wish it so much? And what did they do to Jacques?"

"I will show you." She laid a hand on his wrist. "Look at the hill." He started at her touch, which was colder than the wet stone underfoot, then obediently raised his eyes to the hill facing them. From here they had a good view of the fantastic corniche that jagged down the cliff face like a blade of lightning. He noticed that road-men were at work on it, sanding the surface. Even so, I would go ten miles around, he thought, rather than negotiate those bends.

"First, they cut off his hand," said Daniella. "Now look." Under the touch of her cold fingers, it seemed, the view darkened to a

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greyness between moonlight and dawn. Below, the town slept. Up above on the hill, dark figures were busy with ropes, not sanding the surface now but doing something else to it. Nailing, hammering. Then he heard the rising snarl of motorbike engines, the roar of acceleration. Six, seven, eight, nine, they shot down the diagonal slopes, the prongs of their headlights, like snails' eyes, crossing and recrossing on the hillside. Down they went, then turned and soared back up the hill, then down again, one after another, then up, then down, over and over.

Vidame shook himself dazedly. She let go of his wrist, and the daylight rushed back. He drew it in like air, with gratitude and terror.

"They flattened him," said Daniella. "Like a slug, like a snake on the road. Mashed him. Then brought the tar-sprayer down the hill. Covered what was left. Now he is the road."

"Good god! How can you be certain of this?"

But he knew that she *was* certain. And this was what the group had wanted of her: this vision, this insight. And this was the means they had taken to enforce their demand.

"I suppose you could instruct the road authorities to take up the surface again," she said scornfully. "Then what?"

"But it is atrocious!"

"Oh," she shrugged. "In the old days, when there were gods, somebody was always sacrificed for a new road or building. Was it not so?"

"But you, *mademoiselle?* Are you safe with what you know and what they want?"

Again she shrugged. "Who is safe, ever? But they know I can strike back. That is what keeps them in check. Now, here our ways part, Inspector. Good day to you. The police office is there, straight ahead."

She walked away with her basket to a row of market stalls.

In the small police office the local agent, Monsieur Thénard, welcomed the inspector politely.

"Tell me about that group of young men, the Herons," suggested Vidame.

"Oh, they are a kind of Brotherhood. I believe the group has existed in this town for many, many years. I am a Rennes man myself," explained Thénard. "At first I believed them to be harmless enough, but now I am inclined to suspect they have had a hand in various robberies that have taken place in the Province during the last few years, crimes with a certain stamp of audacity and wildness. But there is no proving anything, and they confine their activities to

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places a long way from home. They travel great distances on their motorbikes."

"Would you have anything to connect them with the disappearance of Jacques Dodman?"

"Ah, I see you have heard the local talk. But no, I have nothing concrete to go on, nothing."

Vidame thought of the scene that Daniella had enabled him to witness. But he could not mention something so fantastic to this colleague.

"Tell me about the Dodman family," he said instead.

"They are not popular. People believe there is something un-human about them. In the old days they would have been burned as witches. 'Their ancestor came up out of the sea,' an old woman said to me. 'Better they should go back and live with him. They are not of our kind.' The mother is not quite—" he tapped his forehead. "You know, of course, about the grandmother—La Daniella?" Vidame nodded. "They say that four out of every five men who watched her performance either died violently or went mad."

"But what did she do?"

"Ah, nobody would ever tell, precisely. That was part of its enticement. The performance was a secret, a kind of initiation ceremony, you might say. I looked her up in reference books relating to Paris theatre of the early 1900s. All I learned was, 'Her celebrated act, which took place in the dark, using phosphorescent properties, is now thought to have been semi-hypnotic; and she was said to have had luminous eyes.' "

"Luminous eyes!" Vidame thought of the present-day Daniella's tinted glasses. He said, "What about the boy, Jacques?"

"Ah, he was just a poor thing, a bit simple, like the mother. He longed to join the Herons—that was his great ambition—but they would never have him."

"No, it is the sister they want, I fancy," remarked Vidame.

Thénard shot him a glance of respect.

"To look through the walls of banks, perhaps?"

"Or merely as a trophy, a mascot?"

Thénard said, "She would never consent."

Since Vidame agreed and since he was quite certain that he would never be able to persuade the town authorities to take up two miles of recently tarred road surface, he returned to Paris a couple of days later. The disappearance of Jacques Dodman was officially filed as an unexplained small-town mystery. Brittany was full of such happenings.

Nevertheless, unsatisfied curiosity kept pricking Vidame to such

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a degree that he decided to return to Zinzac for the midsummer festivities. It was a pleasant enough place, he told himself. It would be interesting to see it in its high summer season.

In fact, when he arrived, he discovered that both the two small hotels were full to capacity. At last, with no particular enthusiasm, he found himself knocking on the blistered door of Madame Dodman's island guest house.

She had not changed in the least. It might have been the same soiled apron on which she wiped her hands before closing the door. She did not appear to recognize him.

"A room? *Monsieur* requires a room? But yes, we have just the one left."

The room was meagerly furnished and not overclean, but these defects were in some degree compensated for by the sound of rushing water and the two windows looking out on the divided river.

"Thank you, *madame,* this will do very well."

"Shall you wish to dine?" she inquired wanly, but he shook his head. He did not trust her cookery.

Venturing into the town later in search of a meal he found that Zinzac was thoroughly *en fête.* Bunting fluttered round the bandstand; girls were dressed in local costume with large flapping lace bonnets; people danced in the street; and there were stalls selling crêpes, mead, and mysterious local drinks and delicacies. Signs on trees announced the famous Cliff Race at midnight, conducted by the well-known Heron Club on their velos.

Vidame, returning to his room for an evening nap before witnessing this event, again encountered Madame Dodman.

"I—I trust your daughter is well, *madame?"* he asked with some misgivings.

"Thank you, yes, *monsieur,"* she replied vaguely. "She is out in the town . . . "

But the inspector had not seen her anywhere.

When he woke, he took a fancy to walk out to the end of the mole, which was long and curved to protect the otherwise somewhat inadequate harbor. No one else was there at this hour on a *fête*-day. The natives were all celebrating in the town.

But then, at the far, seaward tip, he realized that what he had taken for a bollard was, in fact, a human figure, kneeling or crouching on the cobbled footway, looking into the water. As he drew near, the figure rose to its feet, and he recognized Daniella. What could she have been doing? Searching for something she had dropped off the breakwater? The sea had darkened to the deep slate-blue that comes with twilight; oily calm, it stirred in smooth shellback curves,

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except for an idle swirl at the end of the mole, which might be from the suck of the water round the angle of the stonework. Or it might, thought the inspector fancifully, be an eddy as some huge sea-creature sank silently below the surface.

"Good evening, *mademoiselle!*" he greeted Daniella politely. "I have returned to Zinzac, as you see, for the festivities. And I am still hoping to make some discovery relative to your brother's disappearance."

"It is of no consequence now," she said in a hurried manner. "He is gone. We are reconciled to his loss. Pray do not trouble yourself further in the matter, *monsieur.*"

"But—to bring the perpetrators to justice . . . "

"Justice is always done in the end. Think of the thrush," she said oddly. A bell began to ring in the town, and she said, "I must leave you now, *monsieur.* Enjoy your visit."

"Shall I escort you?"

"Oh, no. No, thank you." And she almost ran away from him along the pier.

He followed, inquisitive to know where she was going so fast, but by the time he reached the harborside, she was nowhere to be seen.

Restlessly, he walked the narrow, crowded streets, listening to raucous music, jazz, and earlier, more primitive strains, played on accordions, bagpipes, zithers, and uncouth instruments of which he did not know the names. He looked at sideshows, watched the dancers, listened to singers in cafés, but all the time a kind of feverish curiosity drove him on and upward, to where the last and highest houses clung like limpets to the overhanging rock. Here the town was darker and quieter. Most of the action was concentrated down by the harbor.

But he did hear the faint sound of bagpipes proceeding from a smallish store—building—some kind of chapel, or legionnaires' hall, he thought it might be—and he noticed a dim blue light flickering in its windows. He tried the door. It was locked.

Curiosity now completely overwhelmed Inspector Vidame. There must be a way in somehow, or a means of looking in through a window! He strode along beside the building, which stood close to the cliff, with only a narrow alley at the rear separating it from the rock wall. In this alley ten or eleven motorbikes were parked, hidden out of view from the road.

Motorbikes!

Using immense caution, Vidame clambered on to the saddle of one of them and, standing thus, was just able to peer in through the high window.

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The interior was almost dark, but after a moment or two he could distinguish a group of figures, perhaps a dozen, squatting on the floor. And then, in the distance, he saw swirls of luminosity, which, as his eyes grew more accustomed, he saw to be a person—a dancer—who seemed to wear nothing but a series of glowing veils. She knelt, rose, twisted, struck slow attitudes, then rapidly twirled and pirouetted. She leaned forward, spun around, balanced, bowed, and swayed. Was it Daniella? It must be!

He could not see her face, though. Only a black oval was visible, framed in the luminous coif.

The audience were motionless, as if hypnotized.

Then the dancer slowly lifted her hands to her head and held them a moment, on either side of her face before sharply bringing them forward. Suddenly two points of glowing blue could be seen—her *eyes?* But they seemed to be six inches in front of her face. Now they moved to the side, then upward; like butterflies, they hovered near her head.

How the devil does she do it? Vidame asked himself, and then his precarious perch on the motorbike saddle was disturbed. The bike fell one way and he another, bruising himself on the rock face.

By the time he had scrambled up, the dance seemed to be over. He heard the hall door open and footsteps outside. Had they heard him? No, they appeared to be talking normally enough.

Anxious not to be discovered, Vidame slipped into a niche of the rock. He saw a dozen dark figures—the Herons?—flock around to the side of the chapel and wheel out their motorbikes.

Their voices were awed, subdued.

"Some show, eh?"

"You don't see one like that every day."

"Who is going to take *her?"* somebody called.

"Orthon. He is the leader."

"Yes, Orthon should," they all agreed.

Then he heard Daniella's voice.

"But I do not want to go! That was not part of the bargain. I have danced for you. That is enough."

"No, no, *mademoiselle*. You must not leave us yet," said a rich, rough voice with a mocking hint of courtesy.

A shorter figure—Daniella, he supposed—was ceremonially escorted by two of the others, who wore black hoods.

And then, just for a moment, Vidame had a glimpse of her eyes, sapphire blue, weaving this way and that, agitatedly, before she drew them in.

The warm engines roared into life, and the bikes blazed off. Vi-

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dame ran downhill to the police station, but he became lost in the narrow mazes of the town. By the time he had found his way and was urgently talking to Thénard, the hands of the clock pointed to midnight.

"They go first along the coast road to Pins," Thénard told him, "then back over the moor so as to begin their first lap at the top of the hill. Ah, there they are now. Look!" He pointed upward. The two men were standing in the street outside the police station. Vidame looked at the cliff-face and saw a cascade of lights, two by two, shoot down the first diagonal, turn at the bend like ricocheting tracer-bullets, and pour in line down the second lap.

But at the second bend, instead of turning again, they shot outward, still two by two. The sky was suddenly full of descending, twisting sparks.

"Merciful heavens!" gasped Thénard. "They will crash straight down on to the Esplanade! Or into the harbor!" He bolted inside to his telephone.

But Vidame waited and watched and thought he saw, among the cloud of falling lights, two tiny blue sparks like twin sapphires.

Next day the local paper reported a terrible fatality. All the Herons had been wiped out by crashing from the cliff clear into the harbor. And the cause, for which the town authorities were at a loss to account, was that the road, though inspected and pronounced in excellent condition at eleven-thirty P.M. had, somehow, subsequent to that, been smeared for two-thirds of its length with a thick coating of slime.

"It was the strangest thing I have ever seen," commented the mayor, called to the scene of the disaster. "It was as if a giant snail had crawled up the Corniche." The newspaper gave no account of a girl being found among the shattered bodies. But Daniella did not return that night; nor was she to be seen the next day.

Inspector Vidame, travelling homeward in the train, thought, Perhaps she did not want to live. After she had danced for them, she no longer cared what happened.

He began to smile, remembering that dance, and presently his smile changed to a reminiscent laugh, which made the other occupants of the railway carriage eye him rather nervously and wonder if they should move to another compartment. ●

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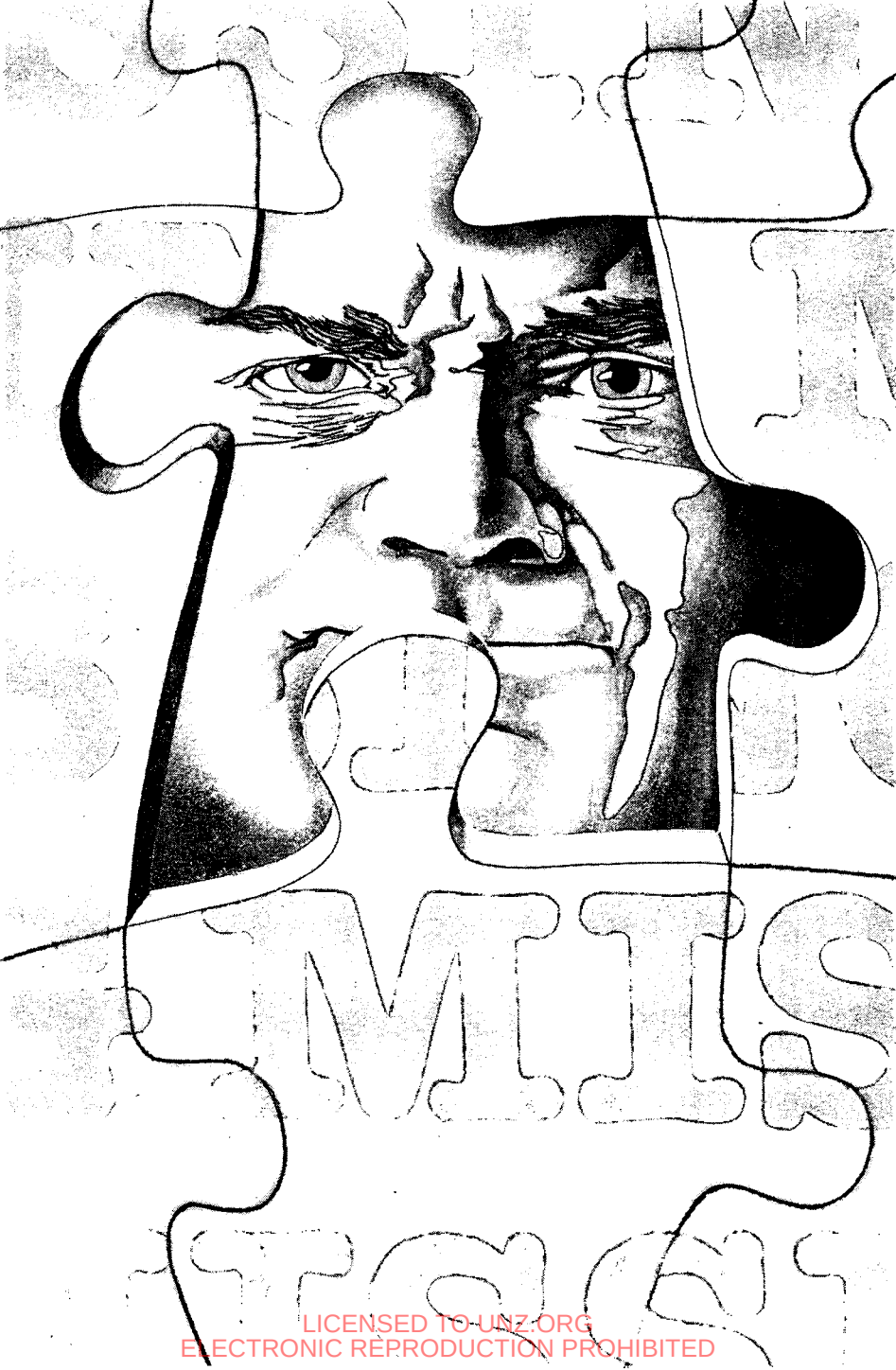

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MISSING

by P. A. Kagan

The author, who's from Illinois, says that this unusual story did not start out as SF. What do you think? And do you know just what's—missing?

art: Odbert

To whom it may import:

I am writing from jail to acquaint you with important facts in this missing part crisis. I ask your pardon for my awkward phrasing; writing is difficult in such conditions.

Until last Thursday I was happily unconscious of anything wrong. But, trying to fathom an unusual difficulty in conducting my daily affairs, I saw ominous signs of a thing not in its normal spot. Only gradually did I grasp its implications, as shown in writings from my diary:

> **Thursday.** An important part is missing. I cannot carry on my work, and I don't know how anybody in town can. But oddly, nobody says anything about it. It's as if nobody knows, though warning signs abound. Knowing how apt I am to panic, I shall not talk about it until I find additional proof.
>
> **Friday.** I am right. No doubt at all. It is missing. As implications crowd in, I shrink with horror. Without it our civilization is lost. And how could it just vanish? Still no talk about it. Looking back, I think it was gradually withdrawn from circulation. It is surprising that I, a journalist, did not know right away.

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Hunting for an ally, I told my buddy Pynchon, who said I was crazy. You watch, I told him, and try to find it.

Saturday. At six o'clock this morning Pynchon was waiting at my door, full of dismay. A cautious man, Pynchon, but not afraid to act if conditions warrant. Pynchon and I shall work jointly on this affair. First thing is to find facts that confirm our diagnosis. I am trying to show him that Washington has to know. All day Pynchon and I sought that missing part, looking for a pin in a haystack. To think that a fortnight ago it was all around. I don't want to alarm our population, though how it could stay so blind is hard to grasp.

I am drafting a manuscript for public distribution, but with difficulty, for now that it is missing, how will I talk about it? This is a form of thought control, which I must combat with all my ability. Words will not go as I want: "This is a day for all good folks to go to aid . . . "

Sunday. Working on a holiday! But our situation commands it. I can spot an agitation in our town, an aura of misgiving in both adults and kids. Though *still* nobody talks about it, all know by intuition that things do not flow smoothly. Only by intuition. How poorly our population thinks!

I finally got Pynchon (who has a good bit of clout) to call Washington. I think our information did not astonish our "guv-mint" so much as our having it did. It turns out that this loss is not just local but national. Officially, activity was put in motion by our call. Both of us had to go to our nation's capital but got no thanks for our pains. High command was afraid to trust us in discussions! Within hours, Washington was amok with rumors. FBI from instinct said it was a Russian plot. Absurd. Any fool knows that that part is as important to Russia as to us. An intriguing possibility has to do with Third World, Arabs, or China—civilizations to whom this loss is nothing.

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Monday. Back in our town, I find still no word about this missing part. I think our high command in Washington is trying to push it out of sight, hoping (as usual) that this crisis will go away.

I cannot allow it, for I am afraid that it is not just missing but lost. Lost for good. All right, so basically it is just a symbol, but without symbols, what basis for communication? It is crucial to our civilization. Without it our world is grown poor.

My diary stops at that point. On publication of my story, I was brought to prison, and for many days had no writing things. A traitor, I am told. It was always thus—punish a man who brings bad tidings.

I had nothing to do with that part vanishing. I only saw it was missing and said so. But it is important to find who did.

For this culprit is still hiding, waiting, plotting to go on with his diabolical work. In jail I can do nothing, so I say to you: *You must not wait.*

Today, *today* a watchdog group must start to monitor things. Do not wait until it occurs again. For I worry. I am afrad that addtonal loss awats us. ●

THE AGING OF CLONES

by Robert Frazier & Andrew Joron

Now you are fleshling islands,
A convergent series in the Great Room,
Identical only in the irises,
Tips of fingers,
And shockwaves of the heart.

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THE FIRST DAY

by Art Vesity

art: Robert Walters

The author lives in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and is a graduate of Wilkes College (which the senior editor cannot resist plugging as her own alma mater). He's currently employed as a "footwear consultant" in a local department store. This is his first sale.

Doesn't it always seem to come too soon? I mean, there you are, playing ball every day or riding bikes out to the lake (even though one of your pals has a pool in his backyard) or just plain sitting around, and suddenly it's only two weeks away, and then one, but you don't want to think about it. And then there's less than a week—you can count it on your fingers—and the games become more fun all of a sudden, and you pack more things into one day—none of that loungin' around now, 'cause there's no time! But nobody wants to say why, until sometime over the Labor Day weekend. Somebody mentions it, and even if it's still real hot, it just isn't summer anymore.

"Well . . . you ready for *school*, Ken?"

And that does it. Sure, grown-ups have been talking about it a lot—got to buy your clothes, what grade you're in now, all that—but grown-ups can't break the spell. Only a friend can. And then you all grumble and moan about how short the summer was, but really you're feeling kind of excited, because you're going into a new grade, and you're going to have a new teacher. And then that morning you all meet in the schoolyard and wait for the bell, all excited but kind of tired, too, because it took a long time to fall asleep last night. And you all grumble and moan some more, but when the bell rings you can't wait to get inside because—well, it's the first day.

I wish we all could have felt that way *this* year. But mostly we were just scared, I think. I know *I* was. How could I not be, with all that happened to the world since spring, and with Mom having that look on her face when she kissed me goodbye at the door? She can't fool me about that look. I know she went inside and cried after saying goodbye. I just *know* it. Kids can tell.

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Billy Clarke and I climbed the stairs together on our way to the sixth-graders' room on the third floor. He was a black kid who moved in down the street from me in time for fifth grade, and we got to be good buddies last year in Miss Grantham's class. There aren't many black kids in our town, and some of the other kids weren't too friendly to Billy at first. But he's a real good guy and smart in class (like me—honest, I am), and everyone got to like him before the year was halfway over. (And he played real good basketball, too—I still don't know why Dad smiled when I told him that.) Well, last year he always said he couldn't wait for *this* year, because the sixth-grade teacher was a real pretty black lady named Ms. Robeson (we knew she wasn't married, even though you couldn't tell from her name). Billy used to hang around her all time when she was on recess duty, and everybody used to laugh behind his back and say things like, "Birds of a feather . . . " It made me mad, and I almost wound up fighting a guy over it once, but I don't think anybody really meant to be mean. It's just something to joke about when somebody has a crush on a teacher.

We didn't say much while we went up the stairs—like I said, I was kind of scared. But not Billy. He looked more mad than scared. "It just isn't fair," he said. "Why couldn't they leave Ms. Robeson as our teacher, instead of sendin' their own guy? My mom says she must be a good teacher to get hired in this town."

"I don't know, Billy," I said. "I guess they want to change things to their own system, so that means the schools, too. She'll be there, only she won't be in charge, that's all. She'll just be sort of helpin' out. Dad says that they promised that the teachers will be there all the time."

"Yeah, but it won't be the same. If—"

"Shush! Here comes one!" I felt real funny in my stomach, watching him come down the steps at us. I only saw one up close in person once before, when me and Billy and Joe Denniger took a bike ride down to City Hall. We saw *two* of them coming out for lunch, and they walked right past us, close enough to touch. They looked something like human people, but not really. They were short and real wide, but not fat, and had dark skin, but not as dark as Billy's. Their eyes were slanted on the ends like a Chinese or Vietnamese (we had one of those in our school, too), and they always wore those dark blue robes. Some people said they didn't really look this much like humans, that they changed themselves to be as close as they could so they'd fit in—that they were something terrible to look at, awfully ugly. I don't know if that's true.

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Well, this one looked okay, but he kept staring at me and Billy, even though there were lots of other kids on the steps. "Good morning, boys," he said, stopping right in front of us so we couldn't pass.

"Hello," I said, trying not to sound nervous. Billy looked at him like he was going to complain about what they did to Ms. Robeson.

"Are you boys good friends?" he said, sort of sing-songy.

"Yeah, we're good friends," said Billy. I could tell he was thinking about saying more, so I kicked the side of his foot.

"That's nice. People of different skin colors should be friends. And that goes for people of different nations, and even . . . different worlds!" He smiled, and his teeth looked funny, like there were too many or something. "What grade are you boys in this year?"

"Sixth grade, sir," I said.

"Why, that's just fine! You'll be in *my* class! Now you go on to Room 3C, where Ms. Robeson is waiting, and I'll be along soon. We're going to have a *great* time this year, boys!" He patted each of us on the head and went on down the stairs. I wondered if he was going to the teacher's bathroom—some people say they never go to the bathroom, but I doubt that.

By then all the other kids had passed, so we were alone on the stairs. "Sixth grade, *sir*," said Billy after we took a few steps.

"C'mon, Billy!" I said. "He's our teacher now, isn't he? Even if we don't like it. And my dad sat me down last night and told me not to make any trouble, 'cause as of this summer, they're in charge. Of the whole *world*! And there's nothin' we can do about it, he said. And—"

"I know. I got told too," he said as we got to the third-floor landing. "But tell me that guy ain't one first-class jerk, Ken! C'mon, tell me!"

I looked at him and grinned, but really, I was worried about him. I knew he had a bigger chip on his shoulder than most people, and I understood why. Dad had a talk with me about that, too, when Billy and I first became pals.

It's an old building, so the ceilings are real high, with fluorescent lights hanging down from them by metal poles. They put brown carpet down last year and painted the walls white, because a lot of parents were complaining that if Waterford (the town down the highway from here) could afford new schools, so could we. Anyway, the people from Tau Ceti say there'll be all new schools soon, all over the world. "Promises, promises," Dad sang when he heard that.

Billy and I got seats next to each other at the end of the middle two rows. Colleen Gray, a real pretty blonde girl who I sort of had

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a crush on last year, was sitting two seats in front of me, but I couldn't really think about her. Everybody was nervous, you could tell. The way Ms. Robeson looked didn't help—she had on a tan skirt and a pretty blouse with flowers, but there was this funny look on her face, like she was in a trance. Kids went up to say hello, 'cause the second bell hadn't rung yet, and when she answered them she sort of looked away, like she was ashamed. Like it was *her* fault the world got taken over.

"She's really bummed out," said Billy when he came back from saying hello. I didn't tell him, but when he was walking away from her, it looked for a second like she was going to cry. Really.

Then the second bell rang. It was 8:30, time to start. The Tau Cetan we met on the steps came strolling in, with that same silly smile on his face. It looked like he'd combed his hair in the bathroom—it was kind of tangled before, but now it was straight with no part, like Moe in the Three Stooges. He said hello to Ms. Robeson and sat down at the desk. *Her desk*, I thought.

Everything was quiet, like at church when the priest gets up for the sermon and takes a long time to think of something. Then Ms. Robeson stood up from her chair next to the desk, cleared her throat, and smoothed the wrinkles out of her skirt. "Good morning, kids," she said in a shaky voice. Then she got quiet for a while, and everybody started to look at each other. She finally got rolling, though, but all the time she talked she looked over our heads, like she was reading words off the blackboard in the back of the room. "This is Mr. Tremaine, who'll be with us all this year. He'll be teaching you some things about his people, our new—friends, the Tau Cetans. Things about their culture, their history, and all the things they hope to do for us here on Earth . . . "

Well, she got through the introduction without having to stop again, and I could tell everyone felt glad for her. When she was done, Mr. Tremaine (I didn't know they used titles like "Mister") got up and started talking in his sing-songy voice. He talked about all the things they were going to do for Earth, and how they got here just in time to save us from ourselves, and how it was going to be a "great alliance." And he talked about the "misunderstandings of late spring and early summer" when they had to fight with some of Earth's armies, including America's, and the "tragic deaths that resulted." But that was all over now, he said, except for "a few little trouble spots." There was never going to be war again, he said, between nations or planets. And pretty soon there'd be no more hunger or disease on Earth, and everybody's life would be "peaceful

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and orderly." There would be no more bad weather, either, and everybody would have a job to do. He made it sound pretty good, and I started to wonder if maybe the bad things I heard people saying about the Tau Cetans all summer weren't really fair. But it sounded scary, too, because he said something about people maybe having to be moved around later, and that seemed to get everybody nervous again. Ms. Robeson, who was sitting down now, looked at Mr. Tremaine like he shouldn't have mentioned that part.

All the speech-making lasted till morning recess, and when the bell rang, we hurried out into the schoolyard. It was a warm, sunny day, but instead of playing, we mostly talked (us older kids, that is—the younger ones went on like nothing happened) while the Tau Cetans and the teachers stood around, watching and chatting. Ms. Robeson stood with Mr. Tremaine near the big wire fence, but they didn't say much. At least *she* didn't, until suddenly she turned and pointed a finger in his face and said something real stern. (Billy and I were watching from far away, so we couldn't hear the words.) Then she crossed her arms and looked straight ahead, and Mr. Tremaine looked like somebody had slapped him. He walked away and left her standing against the fence with her head down. I tried to think of what it could be that they argued about and decided it must have been something about that people-getting-moved business.

"All *right*!" Billy said, slapping me on the shoulder. "I knew Ms. Robeson wasn't no ass-kisser like the rest of these turkeys! Look at Marshall over there (he was the school principal) playin' up to his new boss! And there goes Tremaine—you think he's gonna cry on their shoulders, Ken?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I'd hate to see her get in trouble or lose her job. Hey—look at *that*!"

We watched Ms. Robeson walk over to where Marshall, Tremaine, and the other Tau Cetan were standing. She tapped Mr. Tremaine on the shoulder, and they moved a couple steps away. Pretty soon they were talking and smiling it up like the others. It was pretty plain to see that she was apologizing for whatever it was she said. I turned to Billy, but he was just staring at them and mumbling something under his breath. I couldn't think of anything to say to make him feel better. It was awful, standing there with him like that, and I was sure glad when Colleen Gray came over to ask me how my summer was. She asked Billy about his, too, but he just ignored her.

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Back in class, we started by having books passed out. Mr. Tremaine had us stop and look through each one when it came (except the U.S. History book—he sort of skipped over that one). Billy kept looking at Ms. Robeson like all of the sudden he hated her, and once, when she was passing out the history books, I think she noticed, because when she came back down the aisle on the other side of me, she was biting her lip. She always knew he had a crush on her.

The last book was one about the Tau Cetan Empire. It was thick, but it had big print and lots of pictures of outer space and beautiful color pictures of stars and galaxies and nebulas. While we leafed through it, Mr. Tremaine talked about how this was the most important book we were going to study this year and how it was going to be the most fun and interesting, too. (The cover had a real pretty painting, but kind of corny—there were two adults and a boy and a girl, all holding hands and looking up at the sky with smiles on their faces, looking up at one of the big gold Tau Cetan starships.) He had us turn to certain pages where the best space pictures were, and a lot of the kids kept going "ooh" and "ahh" every time they saw a new one. Ms. Robeson looked up once like she didn't like the way they were reacting, and that's when I noticed she wasn't looking at her copy of the Empire book. She was looking through her history book—I could tell because it was the only one with a green cover. After a while she started turning the pages real fast, back and forth, like she was looking for something that wasn't there. Mr. Tremaine didn't notice any of this, probably because he was sitting down now and couldn't see which book was in her lap.

Finally, he had us close the books. "Now, kids," he said, standing up, "I have some good news and some bad news. First, the bad news. There's going to be a reading assignment in the Empire book." The class groaned. "But now, the *good* news. Since it's been a busy day, you're going to be let out early. In about five minutes, in fact!"

Everybody except a few (including me and Billy) went "Hooray!" when he said that, and he smiled that big smile of his like he was the happiest Tau Cetan in the universe. Then he turned around and started writing the assignment on the blackboard.

That's when I noticed Ms. Robeson's head shaking. Then her hands started trembling, too, even though she was still holding the history book. It got worse and worse, until suddenly she got up and slammed the book on the desk. "No!" she hollered, and a couple of the kids gasped. "It's *not* going to be that easy!" Mr. Tremaine spun around and looked at her with his mouth open, but she kept looking at the class. At us, right in the eyes, for the first time all day.

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"Listen to me, kids," she said, calmer but real fast, "and don't ever forget what I say. You do what he says—read that book, memorize it—but don't you *believe* it! And when you read your history books at home, ask your moms and dads to tell you about the parts they glossed over, parts about the struggles for freedom in your own country!"

"Now, Ms. Robeson," said Mr. Tremaine, smiling but nervous, "you're upset. All this change—"

"To hell with you!" she said, turning back to us. "They left out those parts because they want you to forget about freedom, because they're going to take our freedom away, little by little, until it's gone! But for all their power, they can't get in *here*!" She tapped her heart, and her voice got all shaky and her eyes wet. "Don't you ever let them in there, hear me? No matter what! Because you're human beings, and human beings were born to be *free*. So don't you *ever* let them in there! *Never!*"

I sat staring at her like everybody else, when suddenly I saw Billy jump up from his seat. "You tell 'em, Ms. Robeson!" he shouted, and then he started clapping, banging his hands together as hard as he could.

Well, something came over me then, I don't know what. But before I knew it, I was up and clapping too. And then the kid next to me, and Colleen and some others up front, and pretty soon, *everybody*. Everybody clapping and cheering, like something that was building up inside for a long time was finally coming out. Ms. Robeson fell back in her chair, amazed, and tears started pouring down her cheeks. But they were tears of happiness, I think. And then she raised her right fist high above her head, and we cheered even louder.

All the while, Mr. Tremaine stood there in sort of a trance. Then the classroom door flew open, and three other Tau Cetans came running in. (I think he must have called them mentally—they say they can do that with each other.) They ran over to Ms. Robeson and tried to lead her away, but she started kicking and struggling. "No!" she yelled. "These are *my* children! You can't take me from them, no matter what!" But they were strong, and they lifted her right up and carried her out the door. This scared the class, and we stopped cheering, but a few of us booed the Tau Cetans as loud as we could. Mr. Tremaine ignored that and followed them outside.

"Let her go!" shouted Billy, starting to head for the door. But I threw my arms around him and pulled him down to the floor between

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our desks. "Let go of me!" he said, trying to break my grip. "I got to help her, Ken!"

"No, Billy," I said, holding on tight. "She wouldn't want you to get hurt! That's not what she *meant*. She just wants us to remember what she said—always."

He stopped fighting me, and started to cry. "They'll take her away. We'll never see her again."

"I know, I know," I said, nearly crying too. And then I started talking louder, so all the others gathered around us could hear. "But we'll get 'em somehow. We'll make 'em sorry they ever *came* here!"

Then we heard the door open, and we all jumped back in our chairs. All the kids looked afraid that Mr. Tremaine was going to punish *us* for what happened. But he just smiled his nervous smile and went to stand behind the desk. "Please forgive Ms. Robeson, children," he said. "She's been under a great strain—not only the changes at school, but, ah, in her *personal* life . . . Let's just say there's been some *problems*. Things we don't want to talk about."

"Bullshit," whispered Billy, wiping his eyes.

"At any rate, she's asked me to tell you that she's sorry for what happened, and for not trusting us. You'll see for yourselves that she was wrong, in time." He cleared his throat. "And tomorrow we'll have a new assistant teacher—Ms. Robeson will be going to a new job, something for which she is better suited. And now, I'll finish putting that assignment on the board, and we'll go home and rest up and forget all about this nastiness!"

He turned to the board and started to write. I looked around, and everybody looked glad for not being punished—glad enough to believe what he said, maybe. Then something happened to make me see I didn't have to worry.

A paper airplane sailed over the class from the back corner of the room, floated around the teacher's desk, and then hit point-first right against the back of Mr. Tremaine's head. He jumped about a mile in the air and dropped the chalk, and everybody started to laugh like crazy.

He saw the airplane on the floor and started to laugh himself, keeping that big smile on his face like it was a good joke. But that's not *all* that was on his face. Something else there told me he knew, deep down inside, that he was in for a long, long year.

Kids can tell. ●

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(from page 27)

SOLUTION TO THE VALLEY OF THE APES

The only word the first and second phrases have in common is red, and the only sign in common is thumbing the nose. So thumbing the nose means red.

The only word the first and third phrases have in common is eat, and the only sign in common is turning a back flip, so this sign means eat.

The only word the second and third phrases have in common is berry, and the only sign in common is poking a little finger in the right ear, so this sign means berry.

In phrase one, we know the signs for eat and red, so scratching the left eyebrow must mean ant.

In phrase two, we know the signs for berry and red, so sticking out the tongue must mean big.

In phrase three, we know the signs for eat and berry, so raising the left foot must mean quick.

The word order is variable. To say "Big ant" one must stick out the tongue, then scratch the left eyebrow, or make the same signs in reverse order.

A tribe of hunters called the Hiyikus live not far from the valley of the apes. They hunt occasionally for gorillas in the belief that eating gorilla meat makes them stronger. One day a hunter returned from the valley and reported to his chief that he had entered a cave containing some live gorillas.

"Did you kill any gorillas in the cave?" the chief asked.

"No," replied the hunter.

"Did you leave any gorillas alive in the cave?"

"I did not, oh great chief," said the hunter.

The chief look puzzled. "Did any gorillas enter or leave the cave while you were there?"

"No ape came or went," said the hunter.

"I understand," said the chief, nodding. "There were ____ gorillas in the cave when you entered it."

What number did the chief name? Yes, there is a perfectly logical answer. The Hiyikus have high IQs and very precise ways of speaking. If you don't see the light, turn to page 79.

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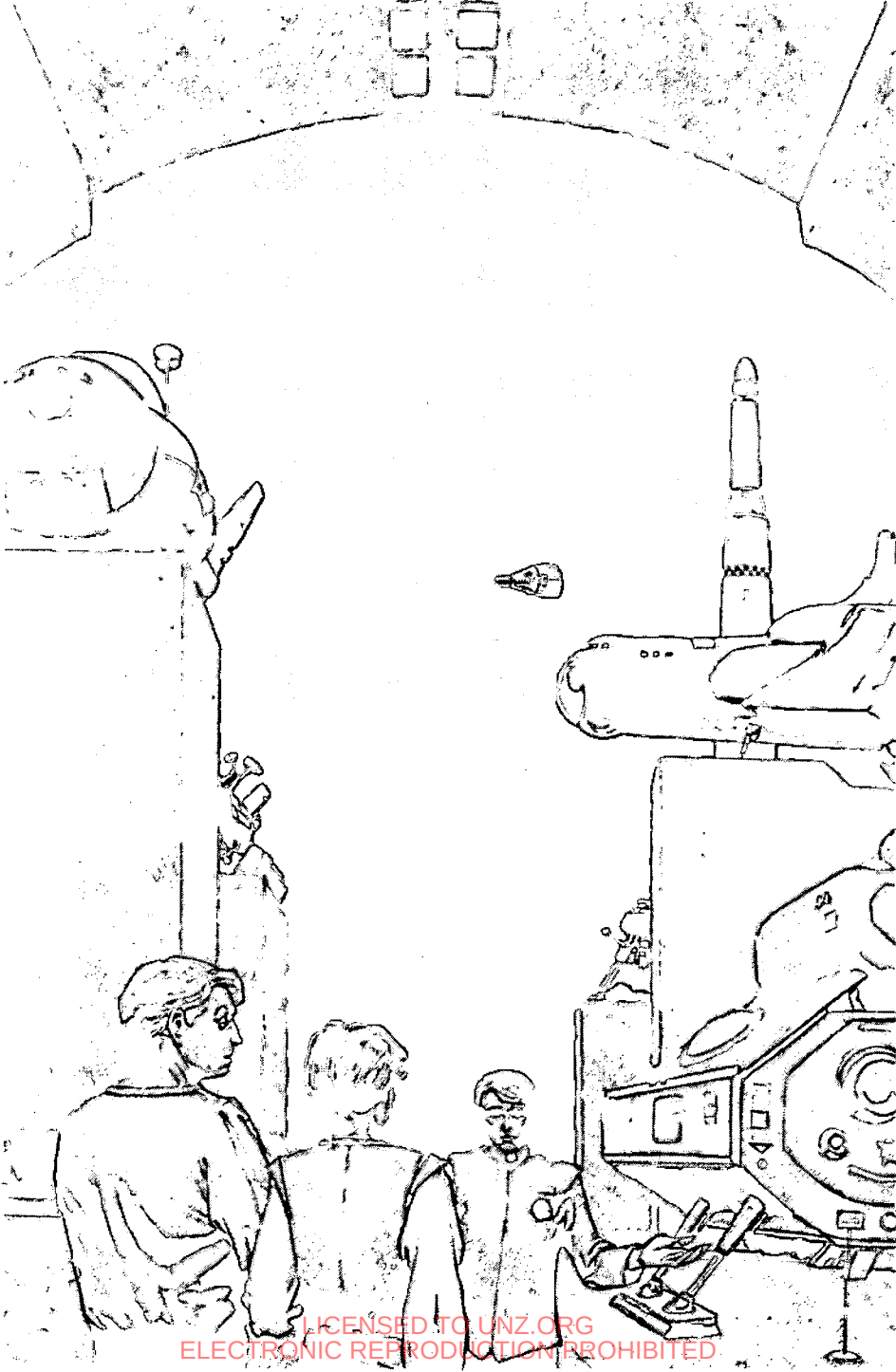

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ROCKET CITY

by Barry N. Malzberg

Barry Malzberg's most recent appearance in these pages was with "Coursing" in the April 1982 issue. His latest novel, *The Cross of Fire,* is out from Ace books.

art: John Pierard

Marge and me, we took Dink and went down to Rocket City. Dink, he got into one of those retrograde simulators, and we didn't see him for o-three-hundred hours. He be flying to Phobos oldstyle, I guess, with the field monitor pouring in his head and all the music of the spheres; but Marge and me, we did walking. We walked through the turbofire and the second-stage exhibits. We walked by old three-level jobs and the actual pieces of craft that blew up on Ceres. It was a slow time in Rocket City, and I was able to get into conversation with one of the guides. "Listen to this, Marge," I said. "He be telling you things about this you never knew. How we flew the planets and dropped on Pluto; how we perched on the edge of the stars and now no more. He primed and full of tapes and stuff: he give the true story of the human destiny and condition and why we no turn outward but inward instead."

"I got no interest in that," Marge said. "What he be telling I be not wanting." But when the tour guide began to speak, she stood in place anyway, partnership being a matter of bearing up. Or under.

"The program was abandoned in the early twenty-fours," the tour guide said. He be a young fellow who know nothing about history, but those mnemonic devices mean they can tell you everything, just like the simulators can take Dink to Phobos. "The utter inhospitability of the environment to stellar exploration was confirmed by the findings of Vieter and Loeb, whose bio-mechanical researches did confirm that the organism could not stand the period of time necessary to reach even the Centauris. Faced with the prospect of becoming a race of planet-hoppers and dilettantes eternally confined to our solar system, authorities made the decision instead to dis-

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mantle the program except for the transfer voyages among the settlements. Hence the establishment of Rocket City so that replications and originals of the real devices of travel could be preserved for all time."

"It all sounds very sad to me," Marge said. "Why give up planet-hopping?"

"The stars they be a suicide mission," I said. "This very discouraging in terms of high expectations; continued flight within the solar system then be perceived as decadent, am I right?"

"Right," the guide said. "Psychotronic control's perception was that the non-abandonment of rocketry in the context of limitation to the solar system would have led to deadly warfare by the middle of the twenty-fours. Hence the devices were dismantled except for Rocket City, which was established in San Diego in 2453 so that our heritage should not be forgotten." The guide stared past us. "I got that right," he said.

"You," Marge said to me, "let us be looking for Dink. O-two hundred hours in that simulator be addling his brain; he come out and not know he be Dink himself."

"In just a moment," I say. "This is very interesting." We only go down to Rocket City once a year, and Marge, she be hurrying to leave from the moment we hit the gate; but I think these visits an important part of preserving our human history and try to get as much from them as possible. With Dink scrambling off to the simulators since he be ten years old already, it be difficult for him to learn anything, and Marge has no interest in rocketry. "Talk about the stars as a suicide mission," I said.

"That's what they were. Certain aspects of the radiation that could not be kept out of the craft, no system being utterly self-enclosed, would have driven the crews insane and have caused them to destroy the mission. Vieter and Loeb proved this, and it was decided that it would be the most humane decision not to subject their theories to proof."

"I think that's a pretty good thing," Marge said. "It would have been cruel. They were pioneers and heroes."

"That is true," the guide said and went into a long speech on the background, but I be thinking of Dink again. Pioneer and hero, that what he wanted to be; that is why he crawls off to the simulators and dreams of stars every time in Rocket City. He would have been very good if it had not been for Vieter and Loeb. But then I can be telling from the look on Marge's face that she not want to listen any more, and I cannot say that I blame her. Maybe she be thinking of

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Dink too. I nod at the guide, and we walk away. There is not to worry about hurting feelings, because the guides be close to simulators themselves, filled with penalyazyne and other concoctions from an early age to make good passageway for the mnemonics: obliteration and suppression of the personality from an early age, in other words. When they off duty, they swim in the tanks or lie in the barrows.

Marge and me, we walk through the gate and into the section where the thrust chambers and multi-levelled rockets be poised in rows against the dome. The arena be almost empty on this slow afternoon, and I look at the steel and circuitry and think how sad it is that most of us, we are now so uninterested in our heritage that this place be almost empty. Year by year there are fewer at Rocket City, and I am pretty sure that by the end of the twenty-fives it will be closed, leveled for more occupation. But while it be still around, it is important to pay our heritage respect.

I stare at the multi-levels and think of the men who centuries ago locked themselves into steel, surrounded themselves with filters, and hurled themselves toward Ganymede. They must have been strange and courageous, informed by the knowledge that they were going to the stars; even though that did not quite work, one can respect their dedication. Dink be the same way.

Marge had had enough. "We be getting that boy and out of here," she said. "O-three hundred hours now in the simulators, and you know what it was like the last time."

I know what it was like. We begin to walk that way. "This an impressive place, though, Marge," I said. "This a memorial to the time when we be spacebound."

"We not spacebound," Marge said. "That be put away."

I do not argue. What is there to argue? She is right, and I have had enough of Rocket City myself; every time the crowds be less and the space between the ships greater. We stroll in our usual way to the simulator barn and pipe in the message for Dink. We wait and we wait. Finally he be coming out in that stunned way they emerge from the simulators, his eyes looking like the guide's. "Who be you?" he said. Disorientation on release be common. "The engines be shutting down; we ready for Ganymede contact."

"Come along," Marge said, taking his hand. "Ganymede takedown come next time." He stumbled along with her, still weak and confused. The simulators, they do one good job.

"Ganymede touchdown," Dink say. "Big Jovian landscape. Moons as big as worlds. Oh, the darkness." They talk like that for some

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hundred hours after release, even longer before they throttle down. "Oh, the darkness," Dink, he say again, and Marge look at me over his little round head. I shrug, I be taking his other hand. We walk quick and fast out of Rocket City then, the night hard over San Diego outside the dome and the lights winking on the tastehouses and the slaughtering bins as clutching his strong spaceman's hands.

Marge and me, we take our 28-year-old son all the way, all the way, all the way home. His round head a spacer's. His cold eyes the stars. ●

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FUN

by Wil Creveling

art: Janet Aulisio

The author has been an Air Force Intelligence officer, a high-school English teacher, and a garbage collector. The last two, he says, have more in common than one might think.

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I was feeling awfully pinguid that morning, so I thought I'd go up to the surface and roll in the sand. Nothing like rolling in the sand during hatching season, I always say. Treat the old epidermis. I went through the tunnels and broke through the crust, and then I saw the Thing.

It was ugly. Shiny. Not gritty and dull, like a proper creature should be. Yuck.

I watched it anyway. I was bored. I'm always bored when I feel pinguid. I leaned on the things I lean on and extruded the things I watch with and watched the Thing: the shiny one, up in the sky.

It had a bad stomach-ache. It was farting out great gouts of flame. Must have eaten too much moss. I've done that.

It sat down on the ground, and its cloaca opened. It excreted two little things. They were shiny, too. They moved about and made noises. They were very small.

I got bored. I rolled in the sand.

I never saw the little things again. I think I rolled on them.

"Colonel Frisch, bad news."

"?"

"Scout Ship *Nosy Parker II* discovered a viable atmosphere on the fourth planet of Finsterwald's Star. Brave men all, they landed."

"?"

"Their last transmission, frantic but clear, reported a huge alien life-form thrashing about."

"!"

"Then, silence."

"So. Send the Quick Reaction Shoot-'Em-Up Strike Force. Fry the bastards."

"Yes, sir."

I don't know why I feel so damn pinguid every hatching season. Do you get that? Some say it's because I'm oversexed. I think they're just jealous.

I went up to roll in the sand again. There were more of those Things! Little cylinders, they were, and shiny. I counted twenty of them.

They were spouting flame again. Right at *me!* Oh, gorgeous! Shimmering energy, great bolts of it, just flowing over me, my god, it felt good! All my weary pinguidity just washed away, I felt clean again and dry. I felt like dancing. Wouldn't you?

I wanted to play.

I jumped up in the air and began batting the cylinder-things with

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the things that I bat things with. Eventually I batted them all.
It was fun.

"General Kurtz, bad news."
"?"
"Strike Force 12 has been destroyed."
"Utterly?"
"Utterly."
"Don't mess with 'em. Crack the planet."
"By God, sir, you mean . . .?"
"Yes. Emission Q. Tight focus."
"Yes, *sir!*"

Hatching seasons are so strange lately. The world seems to be breaking apart. Isn't it wonderful? The Big Ones promised us that this would happen some day, if we were good and cleaned our calyxes.

I'm already encysting myself with the substance that I encyst myself with. No feeling pinguid this time!

And then we can float through nothingness aimlessly, almost endlessly, dreaming in our gritty cysts (that's so refreshing, remember?), until at last we strike some world where there are lots of cute little life-forms to play with.

They're all gone here . . .

Goody! ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 71)

SECOND SOLUTION TO THE VALLEY OF THE APES

There were just two gorillas in the cave. The hunter killed one and left one. Thus he did not kill any gorillas (plural) nor did he leave any gorillas (plural) alive.

We all know the popular song about Lulu ("Lulu's back in town"). Can you think of another popular song—it goes back half a century or more, but is still sung occasionally—that puns on the word gorilla in its title and first line?

See page 164 for the ridiculous answer.

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GREETINGS FROM BOTZ AND SPINNEY

by P.J. MacQuarrie

The author lives in Joplin, Missouri, and enjoys jogging: "Ozark ridge-running," she calls it. Her first sale, "Packing Up," appeared here in the December 21, 1981, issue. This is her second sale.

art: Odbert

Waa! Baw! Gurgle! Burp! Mama! We're just babies...

When it comes to saying GOODBYE!

Goodbye, Spinney—from all the gang at Processatron Compupool.

250GB 875-3
SINCERACARD, Inc.
"We say it for you"

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NEW ADDRESS!

Will you be dropping by?
You know that's what I'm hopin'—
For special friends like you
The door is always open!

Name...Krigia Spinney
New Address...Rt. 1, Dora, Missouri
Tele-Kom number...none

Hi, everybody! Too far away for a coffee break, I guess!
Spinney.

50NA 435-1
TELLCRAFT CARDS
Made in U.S.A.

Would peanut butter miss peanuts?
Would a library miss its books?
Would the ocean miss its water?
A burglary its crooks?

That's how much WE MISS YOU!

Addison, Dabrowsky, Pomato, Walker, Botz—& all the gang at Compupool

275AF 641-2
RE-CYC GREETINGS
Calplex

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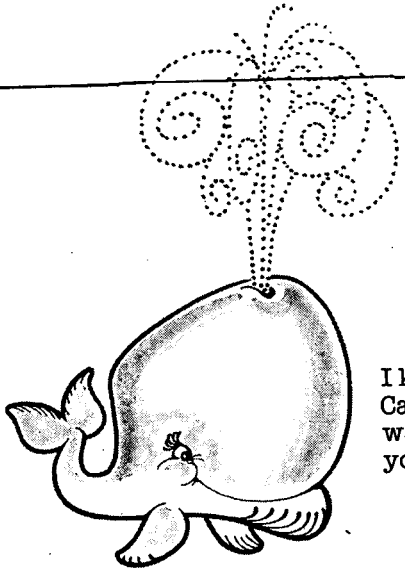

I'm spouting off!
Have a whale of a

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

I know. Not your birthday, Botz. Card selection limited here. But wanted to say hello. Hello! Hope you are fine.

Spinney

125HB 324-8
"Fellowfeelings"
from GREETCRAFT

TO A FRIEND

across the miles...
It's not so far, if we keep in touch.

Where is Dora, Missouri? Botz

275MY 550-5
SINCERACARD, Inc.
"We say it for you"

Botz—

Seems strange—no appropriate card available. Mostly Happy Birthday here. So bought some paper, envelopes. Old and yellow. You noticed?

Dora is in southern Missouri. Ozark Mountains. My place is outside town, 1.25 miles. Country girl now!

House is stone, goldish color. I rent it. Used to be farm. Some people here have cattle.

Seems strange, all this writing. This is first letter I have written. Ever.

Spinney

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Because you're a FRIEND—
let FRIENDSHIP never end!

Spinney, I don't know why you left. What do you do there? Date set here for Megaziputer arrival. Can't wait. Wish you were here.

Botz

300FR 780-6
CAMERADO CARDS
Coloplex, USA

Dear Botz,

What have I been doing? I have been thinking. I have a lot of time for that now. And I have been reading some old books that were left in my house.

It is hard to say why I left Processatron. It was a wordless feeling. Maybe some day I will put it into words. Difficult for me to write what I feel. Doesn't come out right on paper. Wish I had a card to say it.

But I want to write about this place. It is so quiet here. Yet there are sounds. I get up early to listen. It is often misty then.

Spinney

YOU'VE CROSSED MY MIND so much lately...
I had to put in traffic lights!

Spinney, don't you work? Is there public transportation? Megaziputer due here 15 Sept.

Botz

325GF 850-7
FUNNICARD
Made in U.S.A.

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Dear Botz,

I forgot to tell you I work in the store at the crossroads, four hours a day. It's enough. A mile is a good walk. You see a lot. This morning there were two deer, a doe and a fawn, standing in the road. I watched them for about 30 seconds. Then I moved, and they leaped over purple coneflowers at the edge and disappeared. For a moment I felt like one of them. Like another animal, I mean. Belonging there. But when I came home and saw the house ahead, I felt strange. As if someone else lived there. As if I were a visitor.

I wish you could have been with me to see the sunset last night. I was reading on the porch and watched it change. Lilac in one part of the sky, and blue-green, and even a pale green. I didn't know there could be green in the sky. Did you? It gave me a wordless feeling. A good one. I have a lot of those now. Someday I'll tell you about them.

Affectionately,
Spinney

P.S. I read a lot and borrow books from friends. It's getting easier for me to write. It doesn't bother me that it's an old-fashioned pastime.

REMEMBERING...

All the good times, and you.

Spinney, it's funny here without you. Used to work so well together. A team. No one kids around or smiles at me the way you did. Are you coming back? Megazip due in five weeks. Still experimental. We will be only outfit to have one for first six months. Excitement high here. Can't imagine running Megazip without you. Don't read too much, Spinney. Running out of room. Sincere, Botz.

350RT 960-5
HEARTBEATS
Newmexplex

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Dear Botz,

In the mornings, birds wake me. I like to eat breakfast on the back step and watch the sun come up. Sweet peas grow there, planted years ago by someone who used to live here and loved this place. The house is not far from the woods, and there is one little squirrel that has been coming closer to me each morning. This morning it took a scrap of bread from my hand. Oh, Botz, such wonder in me, that a small animal would accept this communication of food! Its fur was gray and tan and variegated, and its eyes were so deep and brown. It had thin, quick fingers.

It takes a while for me to write, to say what I want, but I have time. I want to tell you all about this place.

My walk to work is like a morning meditation. I watch for new flowers—black-eyed Susans are blooming now, and the orange milkweed that draws the butterflies. Sometimes I catch a ride in a vehicle, just to talk to someone, but this morning I rode double on a horse with a customer going to the store! I sat up there behind him and held around his middle for dear life.

The people here are as variegated as the squirrel's fur. They all come to the store. Some have lived here all their lives and seem the keepers of great secrets I want to learn, all about their people and the land. Some have come here like me, to escape a wordless pain that slept in them all day while they worked at their old jobs. You never knew what was happening to me, I'm sure. The pain is almost gone now. It comes back when I remember me as I was.

We're not too busy to talk to people at the store. An old woman told me how to make a pie crust for wild berries, and it was a recipe that had been in her family forever. I trembled at the treasure she was passing on so freely to me.

It was hot when I walked home today, but I didn't mind. It was a pleasant kind of dreamy heat, as if I were a pie crust baking, turning into something better. I grabbed a pail and went out back of the house, into the woods above the creek. I found blueberries! I never thought about where blueberries grew before they were sold in a store. These taste bluer than ever a store berry did, but they're smaller, and it takes a long time to pick enough for anything. Jess says they call them huckleberries here.

How much I've written! I surprised myself.

Love,
Spinney

P.S. I made a pie.

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Dear Spinney,

I am writing on the back of a printout. Couldn't find the right card for you. You sound crazy. But maybe also happy. But don't you miss Compupool? Without clicks and hums and buzzes and color displays I think my heart would stop. Ha ha!

Is it hard to live there? Who does your laundry? I can't imagine you cooking. But I imagine you a lot. Have lost my appetite lately. It's nothing. I'm sure.

I don't know how to say this. I miss you more than I can express. I never knew I would feel this way.

Love,
Botz

P.S. Today I thought I had that pain.

Oh, Botz!

Do you think you could come here? To Dora, Missouri? Please answer me right away!

Love,
Spinney

Spinney, Dear,

If I could get away, I could come and visit you for about two weeks. It's a bad time to leave, but maybe. I really want to.

Love,
Botz

P.S. It's all arranged. I'll be there 18 Aug.

Hurry, hurry!

Your loving Spinney

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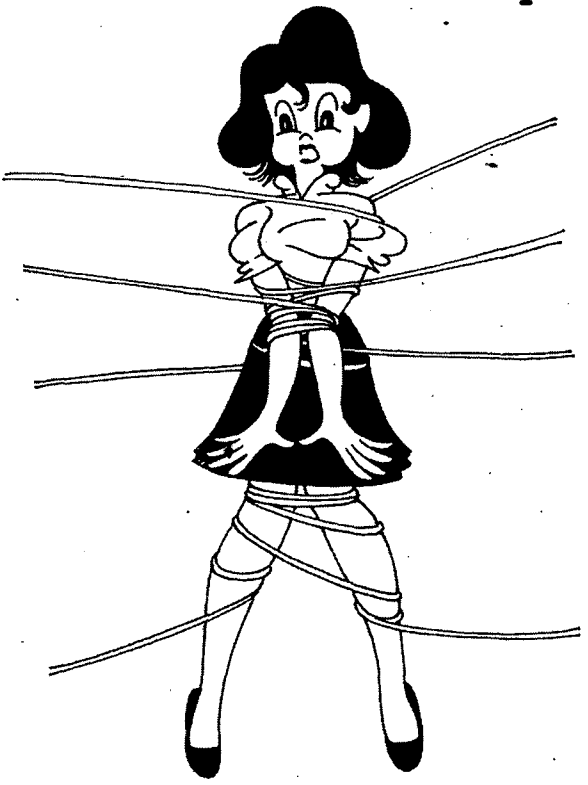
SORRY I haven't dropped a line...
but I've been all tied up!



Sorry I haven't written in so long. This should reach you by 18 Aug. Megazip came in early! No way I can leave right now. It's fantastic! Everything and more than claimed. Possibilities infinite. Was with it first 72 hrs without sleep. Spinney, you would love this computer. Have to run. Botz (Love)

125NW 603-6
FUNNICARD
Made in U.S.A.

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Dear Botz,

It's been a long time since I wrote to you or you to me. I never answered your last card because it took me a long time to think about it. To be honest, I couldn't even cry when I learned you weren't coming. My mind felt vacant, like an empty, echoing house. But I understand what happened, and I'm all right now, so you mustn't be concerned about that.

It helped to spend some time with my friends, especially Beth, who lives with her husband and baby across the holler. And I talked to Jess.

I think Jess undertood best of all, though he didn't say much. He took me to a music festival, and the sounds washed my hurt right away, as swiftly as the creek floats stubborn deadfalls at floodtime. There was one family that played—the mama on the bass, the daddy on the fiddle, and their boys on guitar, mandolin and banjo. The banjo boy's music came so naturally to him that it seemed a byproduct of breathing.

And then! Jess slipped away from me and joined them. He had thimbles on his fingers and hanging from his neck was an old washboard—a piece of corrugated metal in a wooden frame. Attached to the washboard were two cowbells and a hollow wooden block. His fingers tap-danced all over that contraption, tapping, riffing, keeping quadruple time to the music, hopping and skipping, clopping and clippiting—I felt as though it started my heart beating again. And his eyes sparkled, and his red-gold hair and beard were rosy in the sunlight, and he looked right at me, and I laughed. Oh, how I laughed. I hadn't done that in so long a time. I laughed until tears came, and then we rode home on his horse, me in front of Jess, laughing.

When we topped the ridge and I saw my small stone house down across the evening hillside, I knew someone lived there. Me. I was coming home, finally coming home. A meadowlark sang.

Goodbye, goodbye,
Spinney

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THE STUFF OF HEROES

by Esther M. Friesner

art: Robert Walters

The author lives in Branford, Connecticut, with her husband and three-year-old son. The story, she says, sprang out of wish-fulfillment. We must admit, the rejection "slip" in this tale is a lot more personal than most.

Margaret poured herself another brandy and, impatient for inspiration, drummed her fingers on the terminal keyboard. It was her third brandy of the evening, but she rationalized her need for it. One brandy for tradition, one for nerves, and one because of that stinking bitch Agnes Frock. The thought of her arch-rival enraged Margaret, the third brandy made her careless, and she slammed the

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snifter down too hard beside the keyboard. Slivers of glass flew, and drops of brandy wet the keys. She thought she smelled something starting to smolder, so with a hearty curse she unplugged the unit. She wasn't going to get any writing done tonight, anyway.

How could they? She still saw the surging crowd of wild-eyed women pressing around the little table where Frock the Gooey, Frock the Saccharine, Frock of the unspeakable rice-pudding heroes, sat autographing copies of her latest novel and first vivipac work, *Wilhelmina's Waltz*. It proved, Margaret thought, that not only did the public have no taste, but they were also as fickle a band of boobs as ever crawled.

Not even heartfelt inner bitterness could drown out the ring of the doorbell. It was rather late for callers. Margaret activated her patented Stopasin Antigrope belt unit just to be safe and, secure in her force-field-shielded virtue, opened the door.

He looked familiar, but how could someone so outlandishly gotten-up look familiar? He was well over six feet tall, strong-featured, wearing pants as tight as his open-collared shirt was loose. He clutched a square package to his hirsute chest. "Your publishers sent me," he announced, and promptly collapsed into tears.

Well, that explains it, Margaret reflected. In her too-short reign as undisputed Empress of Impresses, she had come to expect neither dress code nor moral code among members of the publishing world. Usually, however, Messrs Wang and Loop took pains to communicate with her through messengers who were more conventional and less lachrymose. "Won't you come in?" she said uneasily, and guided him to the settee nearest the Kleenex.

"How could they?" he wailed between sobs. Margaret poured him a brandy, which he downed with a masterful flourish.

"How could they what?" she asked.

"Stab me, but didn't I tell you, lass? *Samantha's Folly* has—has been—" his voice cracked "—rejected."

So it's come to this, thought Margaret. I should have known it wasn't going to last forever. Damn it to hell, but I didn't think it was going to end so soon!

"They ran the vivipac through the scanner once—just once!" her anguished visitor went on, throwing one immaculately booted leg over the arm of the settee and running his ivory fingers through his tousled black curls. "And they used some pudgy chit of a secretary to test the hero. A sniveling brat still drooling mother's milk to test such a man! Such a—such an Apollo, such an Adonis!"

"I take it you liked him," remarked Margaret, vainly trying to remember what sort of hero she had whipped up to slake the vo-

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racious fantasies of her fans. *Samantha's Folly*? Oh, yes. Oh, damn! That was the one she'd written when she knew her exclusive patent on vivipacs was due to expire. She had made her hero especially interesting, she thought—mercurial, sensitive yet forceful—in an effort to keep the fans with her even after hacks like Frock started horning in on the vivipac business.

After all, what sane woman would spend an evening wrapped in the wishy-washy embrace of one of Frock's chinless Regency lapdogs when instead she might purchase Margaret Harrow's latest vivipac novel and find herself consumed by the flaming passions and desires of a *real* man? Real, that is, while the novel lasted, but while it did, the viewer was also the doer. And the done to.

"Liked him?" her guest echoed. "*Liked* him?" Tears again rose to his dark, hypnotic eyes. "Bless you, girl, 'twas almost as much as I like—nay, love—you!"

He rose from the settee, and the vivipac cartridge fell from his lap. Secure in the protection of her Stopasin, Margaret bent to retrieve it. There was no way this loony could touch her, and she wasn't going to have the cartridge getting all dusty. Even if she was no longer the only author who could use the vivipac process, still she had invented it and was protective of it. She was no great writer of deathless prose, but as a tech designer with delusions of literary talent she stood alone.

Something was amiss. She looked at the cartridge. She shook it. "It's empty," she said, aghast.

"Yes," the reply rumbled like thunder from his broad, virile chest. "They didn't even have the courtesy to rewind me."

Margaret felt her knees melting. He swept her up in his arms before she hit the floor. The force-field of her Stopasin had no effect on a man who was only a supremely perfect, totally tangible holographic entity.

As he bore her triumphantly off to the bedroom, she heard him say, "Don't worry, wench. Nothing's quite so cheering as curling up with a good book." ●

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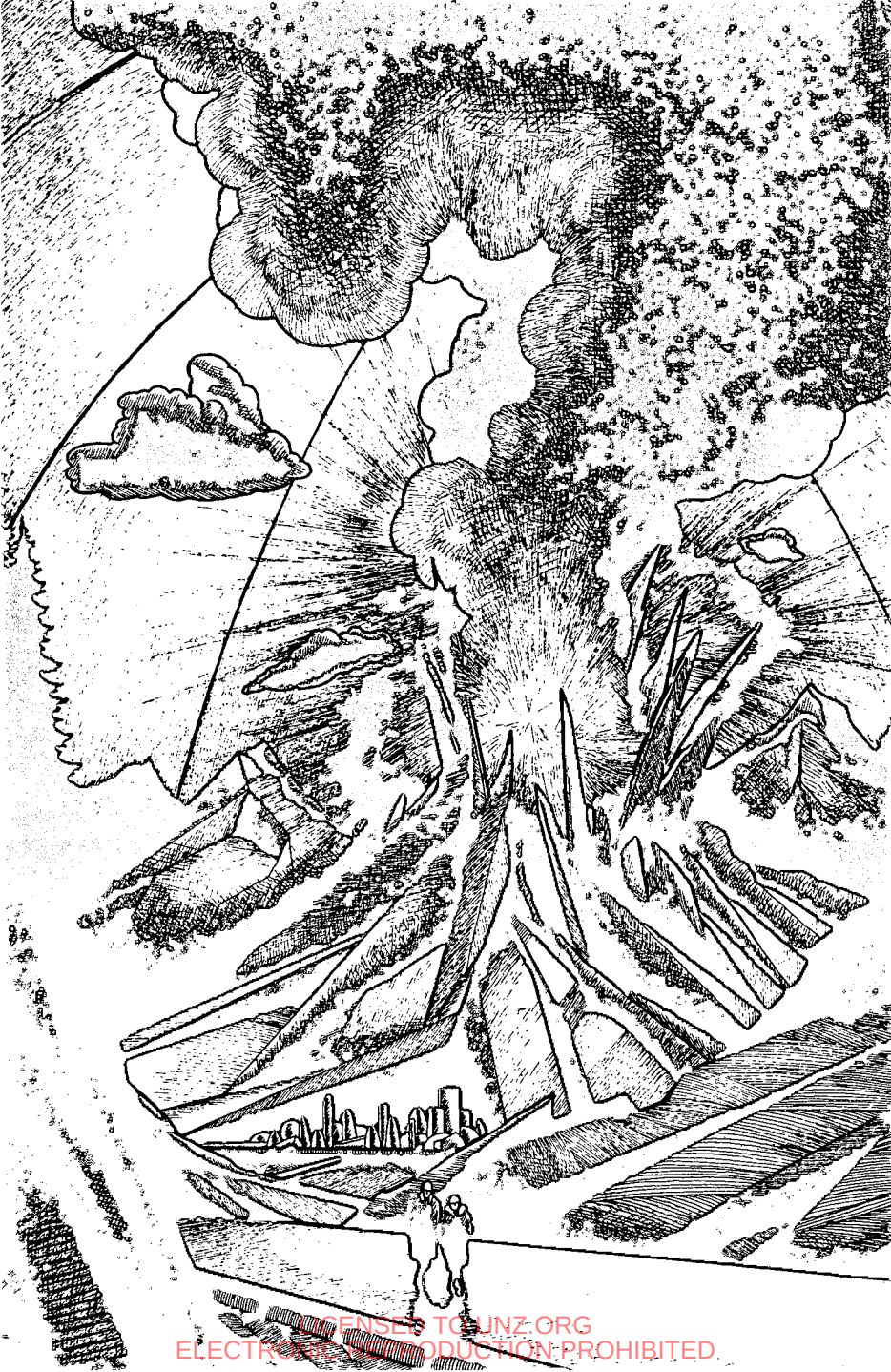

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MOUNTAINS OF MEMORY

by Scott Sanders

art: Ron Logan

The author teaches English at Indiana University; this story is another in a series about Oregon City, which floats.

The mountains closed between twenty-two and twenty-four o'clock daily, to allow for cleaning. Even in Oregon City, where dirt cost more per kilo than sugar, a mountain could become remarkably filthy in a day's time. Children climbing in the plastic trees shook down a litter of branches. Cups and wrappers spread about the vending machines like glacial moraines. Deltas of metal shavings accumulated at each end of the pedbelts. Hikers who refused to ride the belts, toiling instead uphill with the aid of pike staffs, frequently punctured the inflatable rocks, which then cluttered the mountainside like cast-off skins. Old people seated on benches pared their fingernails, and some even blithely spat on the glass walkways.

As the last of the idlers and gawkers withdrew at twenty-two o'clock, detergents gushed from each mountain peak and scoured the slopes. Drains siphoned the run-off into recycling vats, where the muck was reduced to its pristine molecules, which would in due course be refashioned into some gizmo or other.

Herbert and Mildred arrived at the foot of Mountain Three at twenty-four o'clock, an hour they persisted in calling midnight even though midnight looked no different from noon under the eternal blaze of lights in this domed city. Driving go-wagons heaped with the junk they had collected that day, the two old people climbed the mountain's glistening flank. Everything gleamed, the aluminum gullies and steel stumps, the plastic bushes, the glass trails. Below, the grid of avenues sparkled like a crystalline lattice, immaculate,

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unblemished, as if Oregon City had been compacted from the geometrical designs of snowflakes.

While they had the peak to themselves, Herbert and Mildred showed one another their new treasures.

"Twenty-seven cans," Herbert announced, peeling back the cover from his go-wagon. "Five rags, two zippers, a shoe."

"Lovely," said Mildred, as she uncovered her own wagon. "And just look at my bottles and bags and half-a-dozen wigs."

"Isn't that a record for wigs?"

"I believe it is. And they're good thick ones, too."

"You're a sharp-eyed lass, you are."

So saying, Herbert brazenly kissed Mildred upon her withered cheek. Even after months of such meetings, she still pretended to be shocked. That was one of the good things about growing old: you could smooch in public without getting arrested.

After the day's discoveries had been admired, the pair of scavengers shoved aside one of the inflated boulders, disclosing the mouth of a ventilator shaft, and through this opening they dumped their junk into the hollow crown of Mountain Three. As they listened to these new prizes clattering onto their hoard of rubbish, they exchanged the sly looks of conspirators.

Once the boulder was back in place, they sat for a while atop the mountain, basking in the fluorescent light, talking about their childhoods. Herbert was ninety, retired from circuit-sniffing, still with most of his original joints and organs. He was a small man, who had once been as wiry as an escape artist but whose flesh now sagged over his skeleton like a garment he would never grow into. Mildred was eighty-eight, a retired wig-fitter, quick in her motions, scrawny now and possessed of an antiquated beauty, like a palace awaiting restoration. Their youth was so far in the past it had taken on the fuzzy contours of legend. Mildred was half-convinced her mother used to breed whales. Herbert was persuaded that his father, a coal miner, had brought him ingots of goblin iron hot from the Earth's bowels.

Looking down from Mountain Three onto the glittering city, the old scavengers often recalled the winter when the Columbia River froze from shore to shore, and the citizens of Portland skated all the way to the ocean. That ice had gleamed with the same sinister perfection. Salmon, trapped in the ice, had been preserved all winter, and after the spring thaw had wriggled upriver to spawn.

Herbert watched clouds spurt from vents on Mountain One, clouds that would never rain or snow but merely hover just beneath the

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dome like shy angels. "I don't like these sickly purples they're using on the Tuesday clouds," he complained.

"The old fluff used to remind me of Joe Pye Weed," said Mildred, "a purple so thick you could spread it on toast."

"Toast," Herbert repeated dreamily.

"Joe Pye Weed," Mildred said, trying to get him back on the track of the conversation. "The sparrows would get their wings dusted with the purple until they couldn't fly."

"Marmalade on toast. Rhubarb preserves. Honey." Herbert's tongue flicked across his lips, probing the wrinkles as if prospecting for these vanished foods. "Apple butter. Pickled watermelon rinds. . . ."

Once Herbert embarked on his culinary recollections, there was no stopping him. While he drooled through his list of jams and jellies, Mildred recalled other pleasures: the slither of wool against her skin, the smell of horse dung, the sound of cicadas, the ooze of hot tar between her toes on a country road. So the two old people ambled on separate pathways back to the dead-and-gone days from before the building of Oregon City. They ended up gaping at each other, startled by the length of their memories, measuring how old they were by the remoteness of these things.

"All the same," Mildred announced, "I wouldn't go back to those days. If we were still living outside, we'd be dead."

"Killed thirteen different ways by poisons and radiation, and starved and shot to death in the bargain," Herbert admitted.

"One of those alphabet chemicals, DDT or PDQ or something, would have eaten up our bones."

"Microwaves would have snuffed us out."

"Teenagers."

"Earthquakes."

"Smog."

They both sighed. At this point the first sightseers were gliding up the slopes on pedbelts, or squeaking up the glass walkways on poly-soled shoes, young people in masks and wigs, children with painted faces, occasional old people as barefaced as Herbert and Mildred, all of them so fresh-looking they might have just been taken off a shelf and unwrapped.

"Here comes the enemy," said Mildred. She stood up, beating her skirts into order, stamping her slippers on the mountain's aluminum skin until the nearby trees wobbled and the boulders bounced. "See you at midnight, Herbert; and good scavenging to you."

The builders had erected three mountains at the heart of Oregon

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City, which floated on the Pacific like an island of crystal. No matter how the sea wrestled with the city, the mountains never shook, not even in hurricane season. Only the oldest of the old people, gazing at these metal peaks, could remember the mountains of Oregon.

Mountain Three was a honeycomb of simulated caves. Stalactites dangled from the ceilings, mushrooms bobbed up from the floor, bats glided through the dank air, all of them fabricated from some rubbery gunk. Each year fewer and fewer people ventured down into the gloomy caverns. Those who did often returned gasping about the blackness. So the lower caves were gradually filled with out-of-fashion vegetation, deflated rocks, broken trees, shattered creekbeds, sacks of mangled frogs and snakes. These shaggy and bulging items only rendered the darkness more frightening. After several spelunkers lost their wits in these labyrinths, the Health Board sealed all entrances to the caves, leaving open only the ventilator shafts, through which Mildred and Herbert dumped their daily gleanings of rubbish.

Collecting junk was not easy in that spic-and-span city. Like the mountains, the streets and towers and plazas were flushed daily, each quarter of the city at a different hour; and the recyclers down below gobbled everything. No space station gliding in orbit, no ship cruising to the stars, could have been tidier than Oregon City afloat on the sea. By timing their rounds carefully, however, Mildred and Herbert scoured the avenues just ahead of the detergents, and thus managed to find, on most days, a wagon-load of trash: discarded clothing, foam cups, toys, advertisements, reading scrolls, belt-buckles, spare body parts.

People sometimes left stale food or wounded furniture in their path, thinking these old people had somehow fallen through the welfare net into poverty. Most citizens, however, encountering the two scavengers, pretended not to see them. The patrollers assumed they were harmless eccentrics. What did it matter if they hoarded rubbish?

Because of his father's work in the Kentucky mines, Herbert volunteered to build tunnels through the junk. One midnight, after climbing back up the air shaft, he rejoined Mildred on the mountain peak and said, "I figure we've got about two weeks of space left."

She stared at him glumly. "Two more weeks, and then no more collecting!" Her face, pale and criss-crossed by wrinkles, had the look of a snowy field where animals had cut numberless trails. She let out a bright laugh. "Imagine, me, a bag-lady! I remember when I was a girl in Portland, how the old ladies dragged their bags from

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one trashcan to another, picking up bits of string and lettuce."

"And the winos outside the Lighthouse Mission clawing in the gutters for cigarette butts," said Herbert.

"They were always bent over double, those old scroungers, and one of the bags was always filled with newspapers. At night they'd wrap themselves in the papers and sleep on park benches."

"Think of that, people tossing paper in the street."

"Still," Mildred conceded, "it's a wonder the stuff people will drop. It's a regular cornucopia out there in the avenues." She drew up her sleeve and perused the dozen watches, talkies, and calculators strapped to her arm. A few of the watches kept time, although no two kept the same time. Out of old habit, she put one of them against her ear. But there was only silence, the vibration of crystals, the lunge of electrons. It was an awful tidy world, she thought, where watches could get by without ticking.

"What I'll never understand is the lost socks," Herbert said. Hoisting his trousers, he displayed two bony ankles, each one sausaged into several thicknesses of socks. "How do people lose them, just riding around all day on belts or sitting in loungers?"

Mildred gave a profound shake of her head, which was cloud-white because she refused to wear a wig. "It's a wonder, I tell you. A person could furnish a cubicle with what you can pick up in a day."

"Shoes I understand. And a wig can slip off in a crowd. I've seen people lose their upper teeth or one of those replacement ears or a tire off their wheelie, and they never blink an eye. But socks, I ask you?"

"I once saw a lady's nose plop into her soup," said Mildred.

"Did she eat it?"

"The soup?"

"The nose!"

"I don't know. She poked around a bit with her spoon, but I was cruising past in the wagon, and I didn't see the finale."

Herbert's face, already creased by age, wrinkled into a landscape of disgust. "Nose in her soup. People are going from bad to worse. Everybody's getting divorced from their bodies. First they move inside these bubble cities where they'll never have to sweat again, and then they start redoing their plumbing, stuffing themselves with plastic organs, replacing their joints."

"Arthritis is no joke," said Mildred, stretching her legs. "I don't mind having new hips. And if you didn't have that artificial ticker," thumping him on the chest, "your blood would seize up and they'd make fertilizer out of you for the fishtanks."

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"You've got a point there," Herbert admitted. He lowered his eyes, both of which were electronic, and laced the fingers of his synthetic hand into those of his natural one.

"Only two weeks of space left down there?" Mildred brooded aloud, stamping the mountains with her slippered foot. "You still remember how to do the wiring?"

"I could draw you a blueprint," he bragged. "It's been engraved in my head since the mine swallowed daddy."

On the following nights, after dumping their debris, Mildred kept watch atop the mountain while Herbert labored over fuses and relays inside the cavern. They had left passages through the rubbish for just this chore. But during the months while the grottoes had slowly filled, a few shorings had collapsed, barricades of cardboard had given way, towers of cans had tumbled down, so that Herbert now had to proceed cautiously through the labyrinths of junk. As he trailed wires behind him, he often found his way blocked by a rubbish-slide, and he would have to backtrack. Twice the walls collapsed immediately behind him, and he was forced to grope his way out by side-tunnels.

After the second of these escapes, he slumped beside Mildred on the mountain crest, gulping air. "If I don't make it out one of these days," he muttered, "I want you to go ahead and throw the switch."

"With you inside?" She looked at him shrewdly, her eyes puckered up like two sink-holes. "Do you want to be trapped?"

"Lord, no," he insisted.

"And abandon me, just because I'm old and ugly as a sack of last year's potatoes?"

"What a loony thing to say, you great goose." He patted her bony shoulder with his real hand, the one with feelings. "How could I abandon you? I'd sooner unplug my eyebulbs."

The faultlines in her face shifted from a glower to a smile. "I just take a fright, that's all. Sometimes it seems like you and I are the only two sane people left in the whole world."

"I know what you mean," agreed Herbert.

"And I can't stand the idea of you going off first and leaving me alone."

"Never you worry, old duck." He pecked her on the cheek.

"Herbert, let's promise that if either of us decides to pop off, we'll go tell the other one, so we can hold hands and jump down a recycle chute together."

"Sounds good to me," he said. "Mingle our molecules."

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She sat back with relief. Her white bank of hair made him think of cumulus clouds. She grew thoughtful. "It still seems unnatural to me, dissolving people in a soup of acids, instead of burying them like they used to."

Herbert replied, "Even when they planted folks in pine boxes, the worms eventually recycled them. Acids are just quicker."

"I'd rather feed worms."

"Me too."

"I wonder if there's a single worm inside Oregon City. Maybe somebody raises them for an experiment somewhere. Manufacturers of protein burgers, say. We could volunteer our corpses to the worm farm."

"I don't know about you, ducky," said Herbert, mounting his wagon for the descent, "but I'm not a corpse by a long shot. Let's go scavenge."

The mountain could not quite hold all the junk they brought back that midnight. Mildred squashed as many of the bottles and printouts and broken gadgets as she could through the trapdoor, until she heard the rubbish shifting ominously inside the caverns. Herbert was down there, crawling through the ticklish passageways, stretching the last of his wires. Down he scrabbled, helmet-light wagging, into the deepest recesses of the mountain. He would have been glad right then for a pair of synthetic knees. His natural joints were killing him. He wondered how his father had endured the pain and claustrophobia for all those decades in the mines. A pack of hungry kids at home would make a man put up with just about anything, he supposed.

After placing the last relay, Herbert started crawling back toward the surface. The mass of junk shuddered above him, and somewhere a tunnel collapsed. He made his way gingerly up through the passage, thinking of his father crushed in that Kentucky mine, remembering his promise to Mildred. A second quake buckled the props immediately ahead of him, lowering the ceiling, but he could still slither through on his belly. The knees of his shimmersuit were torn to shreds. Further on he was able to stand nearly upright, and he shuffled along on his wilted legs. Whenever the tunnel divided he chose what looked to be the sturdier branch. From the walls on either side of him protruded handles, strings, artificial arms, the edges of books, the corners of pictures, all compressed into strata like the mud of an ancient sea, but Herbert scarcely looked at them, he was so intent on escaping.

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Some few dozen meters above him, Mildred was perched on a boulder, listening to the mountain as if it were a feverish baby. Each time it grumbled and heaved, she groaned. The rubbish-quakes sent tremors up through the aluminum slope, through the elastic boulder on which she sat, through her bones.

"You all right, Herbert?" she whispered into the talkie strapped to her wrist.

A moment later his voice murmured through the plug in her ear: "Tired. Getting old, ducky. But I'll make it."

"Mind you don't go collecting spoons or anything. Come straight up."

"Never fear," he panted. "Now hush."

She drew the talkie away from her lips. The patrollers could hear you blink your eye, if they happened to be listening in your direction. They could listen to your heart, and tell you if one of your valves was sticking.

Mildred watched the first visitors arriving at the base of the mountain. The young people usually rode the conveyor up the side. Some of the old people climbed on foot, mouths groping for air like stranded fish. For years she had been puzzled by these old climbers. Why did they labor up these metal slopes? What pleasure did they get from a thumping heart, spots dancing before their bleary eyes? Now she understood. She was one of them, an antique woman inhabiting a half-remodeled body. The new half of her was numb, as if the surgeons had implanted a gob of emptiness in place of her knees, her liver, her right foot and left shoulder, all the failed joints and organs. Her remaining flesh creaked and moaned about these empty spaces like a haunted house; but at least it was still *haunted,* not yet abandoned, and there was nothing like a jaunt up the mountainside to stir up the spirits.

"Herbert," she whispered into the talkie, "the enemy's afoot."

For a moment only his gasps leaked through the plug in her ear. Then he muttered, "You go ahead down. I'll come when I come."

"Not without you," she hissed.

"I'm taking a little rest."

"You're not prospecting? Hunting for old socks or cutting pictures from the magazines?"

"Heavens, no."

"Nothing the matter with your ticker?"

By way of answer, the thump of his heartbeat came slushing through her earplug.

"Sounds pretty good," she whispered. "How far do you have to go?"

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A rasping noise smothered his reply as a quake shook the mountain. Mildred glanced in alarm downhill. The young people stepped nervously from the pedbelts. The elderly hikers paused, leaning on their pikestaffs.

"Herbert?" she hissed.

"It's all right," he grunted. "A little slide. I'm digging through."

"Where are you?"

"Tunnel three, meter nine."

"I'm coming to get you."

"Stay put."

"You hush."

"People will see you."

"Damn their snoopy eyes."

Stealthily, she rolled the boulder aside, opened the trapdoor, and crept down the rungs of the ventilator shaft. If someone discovered their secret, so be it. Plan or no plan, she was not about to lose Herbert. At the base of the ladder, where the rubbish tunnels began, she found the extra flashlight, switched it on, and shuffled into the gloom. At the mouth of tunnel three a sleeve dangled down from the roof, a bent golf club elbowed out from the wall. Mildred slithered past, careful not to touch anything but the well-packed floor. Another slide, and we'd both be sardines for good, she thought.

Within a few paces she came up against a blockade where the roof had collapsed. Through the wall of debris she could hear quiet scratching sounds, as if a mouse were pawing its way through an avalanche of cans. She began carefully working from her side of the barricade, removing a pan, a crushed hat, a picture frame.

"Mildred?" his voice curled in her ear.

"You were expecting a mole?"

"Go gently, lass."

"Yes, mister miner." She pried loose a clump of toothbrushes, a bag of hairclippings. "I hope your daddy was better than you at shoring up mineshafts."

"My daddy's mountains were made of rock," Herbert wheezed, "not loose junk."

The sound of his scratching drew nearer. Mildred got down on her knees and cautiously clawed her way forward. A chunk of roof fell on her, but the arch of debris above that held firm, so she shrugged the stuff from her back and kept going. Presently she cleared away the crumpled chassis of a wheelie, and there was Herbert's light. In a moment his hands appeared through the opening, the fleshy one bleeding and the synthetic one looking pretty battered, and then his

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face emerged. She squirmed forward and kissed him. His breast pocket was full of spoons.

A grin puckered the skin about his eyes into an accordion of valleys and ridges. "Funny sort of hell we built ourselves, ducky."

They were soon climbing the ladder up the ventilator shaft, Mildred leading the way. Near the top she halted, and peeked out to see if any hikers had arrived. An old couple sat on a bench nearby, but otherwise there was no one about. As Mildred and Herbert clambered onto the mountain peak, closed the trapdoor, and shoved the boulder back in place, the couple on the bench gazed at them with mild curiosity.

"Just checking on the mushrooms," Herbert offered by way of explanation.

"Indeed?" said the old woman.

"More of the rubber ones?" inquired the old man.

"It's a pity there's no horse manure," the woman said. "Real mushrooms used to grow in horse manure."

"In caves," said Herbert.

"In the dark," said Mildred.

The two elderly couples exchanged looks, a glance of recognition with a half-smile, like prisoners trading hacksaws.

Mildred and Herbert rode their wagons down Mountain Three for the last time.

At twenty-two o'clock that evening they left their wagons at home and walked to the light-fountain in Cascade Plaza, he limping on his arthritic knees, she striding along on her nylon ones. They sat on the fountain's edge, with the colored lights swarming at their backs and the three mountains rising in the park before them. The mountains were barren, for the gates had closed. While the aged scavengers watched, detergents gushed from each peak, streamed down the slopes, and vanished through drains. The mountains gleamed. The entire city looked as though it had been born that very instant, the pure architecture of thought.

"Do you want to do it?" Herbert asked, drawing the switchbox from his pocket.

"Let's both," said Mildred, placing her hand on his.

Together they pressed the button.

The sides of Mountain Three bulged, cracked, the top burst open, smoke and ash and clots of junk spewed into the enclosed sky of Oregon City. Traffic stopped. Riders leapt from the pedbelts and stood gawking as the air filled with shoes, wigs, forks, spinning bottles and glinting cans, film snarled like spaghetti, posters, printed circuits, all the leavings of their lives. Melted globs of plastic

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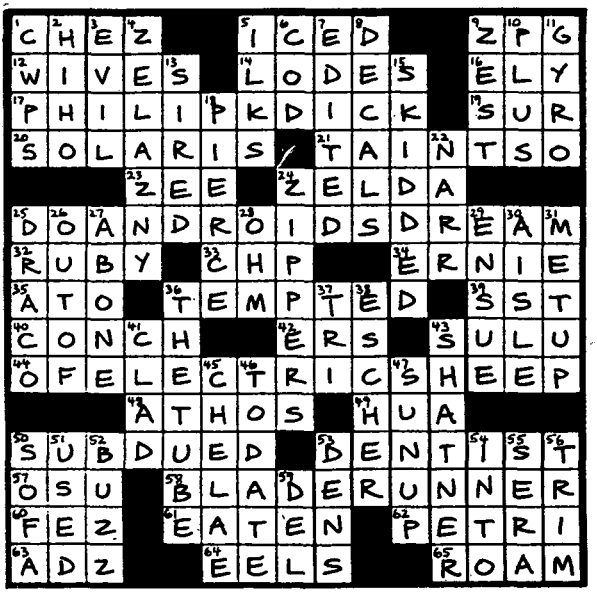
settled on the walkways. Grease smeared the windows. Twisted scraps of metal battered the gleaming tiles. The citizens were struck motionless, gaping at the burst mountain, their avenues grown suddenly treacherous, while ash and cinders rained down on their wigs and white gowns, on their measured noses, on their painted masks. A blizzard of forgotten things spattered the city.

Holding one another's hands, Mildred and Herbert crouched solemnly beside the fountain, two lean old-timers with long memories, watching their mountain erupt, their Oregon volcano. ●

IAsfm Puzzle #1

Solution to "Now Playing"

from page 24.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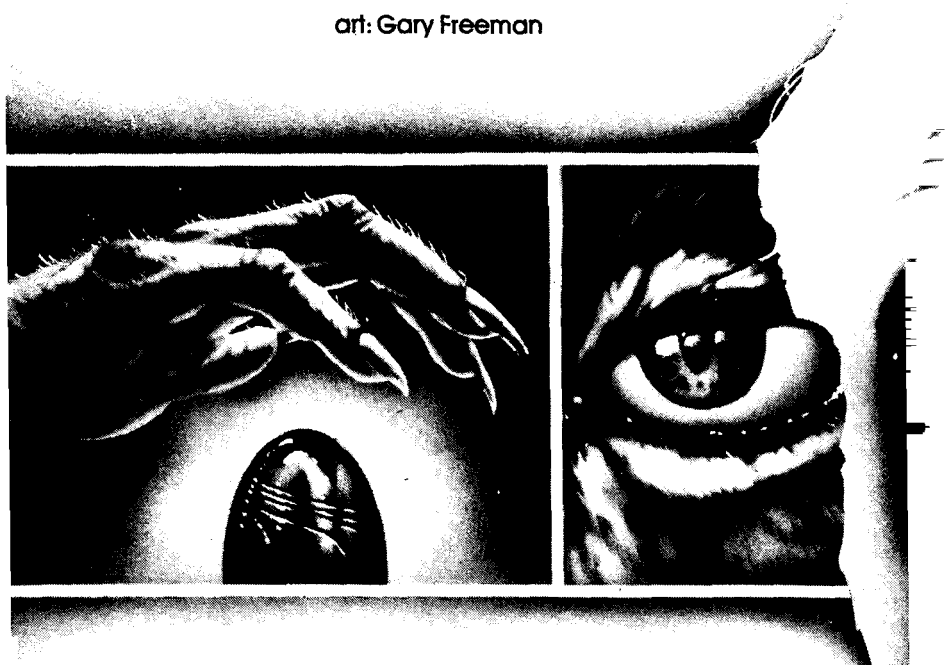
BLACK HOLE MOVE

by Jack McDevitt

art: Gary Freeman



The author lives in Pembina, North Carolina, of which he notes: "It's been my impression that towns get friendlier as climate deteriorates. Pembina is the friendliest place I've ever seen." This is his second sale to us. His first, "The Far Shore," appeared in the June 1982 issue.

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Maybe it's just my imagination, but I'm worried.

The roast beef has no taste, and I'm guzzling my coffee. I'm sitting here watching Turner and Pappas working on the little brick house across the avenue with their handpicks. Jenson and McCarthy are standing over near the lander talking and waving their arms. And Julie Bremmer is about a block away approaching with another artifact of some sort in her arms. Everything is exactly as it was yesterday.

Except me.

In about two hours, I will talk to the Captain. And I will try to warn him.

Odd, but this is the only place in the City where people seem able to speak in normal tones. Elsewhere, voices are hushed. It's like being in City Hall at midnight.

I guess it's the fountain, with its silver spray mushrooming into the late afternoon sun and drifting down, windblown, splattering into the pool. The park glades are a refuge against the wide, still avenues and the empty windows. Through the branches, the glass towers are blue and delicate.

There is perhaps no sound quite so soothing as the slap of water on stone. (Coulter got the fountain working yesterday, using a generator from the lander.) Listening, seated on one of the slab benches at the fountain's perimeter, I can feel how close we are, the builders of this colossal city and I. And that thought is no comfort.

It's been a long, dusty, rockbound road from Earth to this park. The old hunt for extraterrestrial intelligence has taken us across a thousand sandy worlds in a quest that became, in time, a search for a blade of grass.

I will remember all my life standing on a beach under a golden sun beyond Sirius, watching the waves come in. Sky and sea were crystal blue; no gull wheeled through the still air; no strand of green boiled in the surf. It was a beach without a shell.

But here, west of Centauri, after almost two centuries, we have a living world! We looked down, unbelieving, at forests and jungles and dipped our scoops into a crowded sea. The perpetual bridge game broke up. And on the second day we saw the City!

A glittering sundisc, it was set in the southern temperate zone, in a coastal mountain chain. With it came our first mystery: other than a few structures in the immediate area of the City, there was no other habitation that we could find, anywhere.

On the fourth day, Olszewski gave his opinion that the City was deserted.

We went down and looked. They had put their cars in their ga-

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rages, locked their homes, and gone for a walk. It was eerie: a house awaiting its owner's return.

Mark Conover, riding overhead in the *Chicago* after a brief visit to the surface, speculated that the builders were not native to this world.

They were jointed bipeds, somewhat larger than we are. We can sit in their chairs and, when we figure out how to start them, drive their cars.

It's a city of domes and minarets. The homes are spacious, with courtyards and gardens, now run to weed. And they were fond of games. We found a stadium, equipment in private homes that could only have an athletic purpose, assorted puzzles using geometrical shapes, and exquisite inlaid 81-square checkerboards, complete with colored glass pieces.

They had apparently not discovered photography; nor, as far as we could determine, were they given to the plastic arts. There were no statues. Even the fountain lacked the usual boys on dolphins or winged women that are associated with such things. It was instead a study in wet geometry, a complex of leaning slabs, balanced spheres, and odd-angled pyramids.

But then Carson's people walked into a small home a block from where the second lander had come down and found some etchings in charcoal. And we had our extraterrestrials.

Cats, someone said.

Maybe. The following day we came across an art museum and found several hundred watercolors, oils, tapestries, painted glass, and so on.

They *are* felines, without doubt, but the eyes look very human. And the beings in the paintings, bundled against storms, gazing across plowed fields at sunset, smiling benevolently (or pompously) out of portraits, are most assuredly familiar. In one particularly striking watercolor, four females cower beneath an angry sky. Between heaving clouds, a pair of full moons illuminate the scene.

This world has no satellite.

Virtually everyone crowded into the museum. It was a day of sighs and grunts and exclamations, but the day brought us no closer to the central question: where had they gone?

"Just as well they're not here," one of the crewmen remarked to Carson in front of the storm watercolor. "This is the only green world anyone has seen. It's one hell of a valuable piece of real estate. Nice of them to give it to us."

I was at the time standing across the gallery before a massive oil

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on prominent display. It was done in impressionistic style, reminiscent of Degas: a group of men (I don't know what else to call them) were gathered about a game of chess. Two were seated at the table, hunched over the pieces in the classic pose of the dedicated player. Six more clustered about, half in shadow, intent on the play.

Their expressions were quite human. If one allowed for the ears, and the loose-fitting garments, the scene might easily have been a coffeehouse back in New York.

The table was set under a hanging lamp; its hazy illumination focused attention on the board rather than the participants.

The game was not actually chess, of course. It was the 81-square version we had seen in so many homes. There was no queen. Instead, the king was flanked by a pair of pieces similar, but not identical, to the rooks. I had no doubt that the stylized hemispheres at the extremes of the position *were* rooks, though none had moved. (Where else but on the flank would one reasonably place a rook?)

The other pieces, too, were familiar. The left-hand Black bishop had been fianchettoed: a one-square angular move onto the long diagonal, from where it exercises withering power. All four knights had been moved, and their twisted tracks betrayed their identity.

The game was still in its opening stages. White was two pawns up, temporarily. It appeared to be Black's move, and he would, I suspected, seize a White pawn which had strayed deep into what we would consider his queenside.

I stood before that painting, feeling the stirrings of kinship and affection for these people and wondering what immutable laws of psychology, mathematics, and aesthetics ordained the creation of chess in cultures so distant. I wondered whether the game might not prove a rite of passage of some sort.

I was about to leave when I detected a wrongness somewhere in the painting, as if a piece were misplaced, or an extra eye floated somewhere. Whatever it was, I became suddenly aware of my breathing.

There was nothing.

I backed away. Then I turned and hurried out of the building.

I'm a symbologist, with a specialty in linguistics. If we ever do actually find someone out here to talk to, I'm the one who will be expected to say hello. That's an honor, I suppose; but I keep thinking of Captain Cook.

By the end of the first week, we had not turned up any written material (and, in fact, still haven't) other than a few undecipherable inscriptions on the sides of buildings. They were much more com-

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puterized than we are, and presumably everything went into the banks, which we have not yet found. I doubt that we will find them.

In fact, the computers themselves are wrecked, slagged. So, by the way, is the central power core for the City. Another mystery.

Anyhow, I had little to do, so yesterday I went for a walk in the twilight with Jennifer East, a navigator aboard the *Chicago* and the pilot of the other lander. She's lovely, with bright hazel eyes and a quick smile. Her long tawny hair was radiant in the setting sun. The atmosphere here has a moderately high oxygen content, which affects her the way some women are affected by two martinis. She clung to my arm, and I was breathlessly aware of her long-legged stride.

There was a sense of walking through the streets of an idealized, mystical Baghdad: the towers were gold and purple in the failing light. Flocks of brightly colored birds scattered before us. I half-expected to hear the somber cry of a ram's horn, calling the faithful to prayer.

The avenue is lined with delicate, graybarked trees. Their broad, filamented leaves sighed gently in a sudden gust of wind. Far-off thunder rumbled.

Behind the trees are the empty homes, no two alike, and other structures that we have not yet begun to analyze. Only the towers exceed three stories. All the buildings I have seen, large and small, are marked by graceful arcs and beveling; right angles do not exist. I wonder what the psychologists will make of that.

"How long have they been gone?" she asked. Her eyes were luminous with excitement, directed (I'm sorry to say) at the architecture.

"About ten years," I said. Here and there, the pavement on which we walked had cracked; the forest was beginning to push through.

Jennifer's brow creased as she reached for the people of the City. At that moment, in that place, we touched a pulse. "Oh, Mark," she said, "they haven't really left."

There was nothing you could put in a report, but I knew that we were transients, that those streets had long rung to laughter and song, that they soon would again, and that it would not be ours.

She drew closer to me.

I envied her; this was her first flight. For most of us, there had been too many broken landscapes, too much desert; the mind had dulled, and the spirit trembled on the edge of an empty universe. "Olszewski thinks that the northern section of the City is almost two thousand years old. . . . They'd been here awhile."

"And they just packed up and left." She steered us out of the center

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of the avenue, in among the trees, where I think we were both more comfortable.

"It's ironic," I said. "No one would have believed that first contact would come like this. They've been here since the time of Constantine, and we miss them by a decade."

Jenny's eyes remained thoughtful. She squeezed my hand. "Did you know it's the second time?" she asked. I must have looked blank. "Twenty-two years ago the *Leningrad* tracked something across the face of Algol and then lost it. Whatever it was, it threw a couple of sharp turns." We walked for some minutes in silence, crossed another broad avenue, and approached the art museum. "Algol," she said, "isn't all that far from here."

"UFO stories," I said. "They used to be common."

She shrugged. "It might be that the thing the *Leningrad* saw frightened these people off. Or worse."

The museum is wheel-shaped. Heavy, curving panels of tinted glass are ribbed by a polished black stone that is probably marble. The grounds have become a wild tangle of weed and shrub anchored by overgrown hedge. A few flowering bushes still survive.

I laughed. "You don't suppose the sun is about to nova, do you?"

She smiled and brushed my cheek with her lips. Jenny is 23 and a graduate of MIT, where all the variables are in the text or the program.

"It's going to rain," she said.

We walked through the shadow of a turret. The air was cool.

"They seem to have taken their time about leaving. There's no evidence of panic or violence. And most of their personal belongings apparently went with them. Whatever happened, they had time to go home and pack."

She looked uneasily at the sky. Gray clouds were gathering in the west. "Why did they melt the computers? And the power plant? Doesn't that sound like a retreat before an advancing enemy?"

We stood a few minutes on the rounded stone steps at the entrance, watching the coming storm. Near the horizon, a finger of lightning touched the ground; it too was delicate, like the trees.

And I knew what had disturbed me about the painting.

Jenny doesn't play chess. So when we stood again before that intense painted congregation and I explained, she listened dutifully, and then tried to reassure me. I couldn't blame her.

I have an appointment to meet the captain in the gallery after dinner. He doesn't play chess either. Like all good captains down through the ages, he is a man of courage and hard-headed common

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sense, so he will also try to reassure me.

Maybe I'm wrong. I hope so.

But the position in that game: black is playing the Benko Gambit! It's different in detail, of course; the game is different. But Black is about to clear a lane for the queenside rook. One bishop, at the opposite end of the board, is astride the long diagonal, where its terrible power will combine with that of the rook. And White, after the next move or two, when that advanced pawn comes off, will be desperately exposed.

It's the most advanced of the gambits for Black, still feared after three hundred years. . . .

And I keep thinking: the City dwellers were surely aware of this world's value. More, they are competitors. They would assume that we would attempt to take it from them.

"But we wouldn't," Jenny had argued.

"Are you sure? Anyhow, it doesn't matter. The only thing that *does* matter is what they believe. And they would expect us to act as they would.

"Now, if they knew in advance that we were coming . . ."

"The *Leningrad* sighting . . . "

" . . . They might wish to avoid a state of tension. That would only serve to alert us. So they withdraw, and give us the world, and, with it, an enigma." Rain had begun sliding down the tinted glass. "They're playing the Benko."

"You mean they might come back here in force and attack us?" She was aghast, not so much at the possibility, which she dismissed, as at the direction my mind had taken. I guess she thought she knew me.

"No," I said. "Not us. The Benko isn't designed to recover a lost pawn, although that happens too." I could not take my eyes from the painting. Did I detect a gleam of arrogance in Black's eyes? "No. It doesn't fool around with pawns. The idea is to launch a strike into the heart of the enemy position."

"Earth?" She smiled indulgently. "They wouldn't even know where Earth is."

I didn't ask whether she thought the *Leningrad* had gone home alone.

One more thing about that painting: there's a shading of light, a chiaroscuro, in the eyes of the onlookers. It's the joy of battle.

I'm scared. ●

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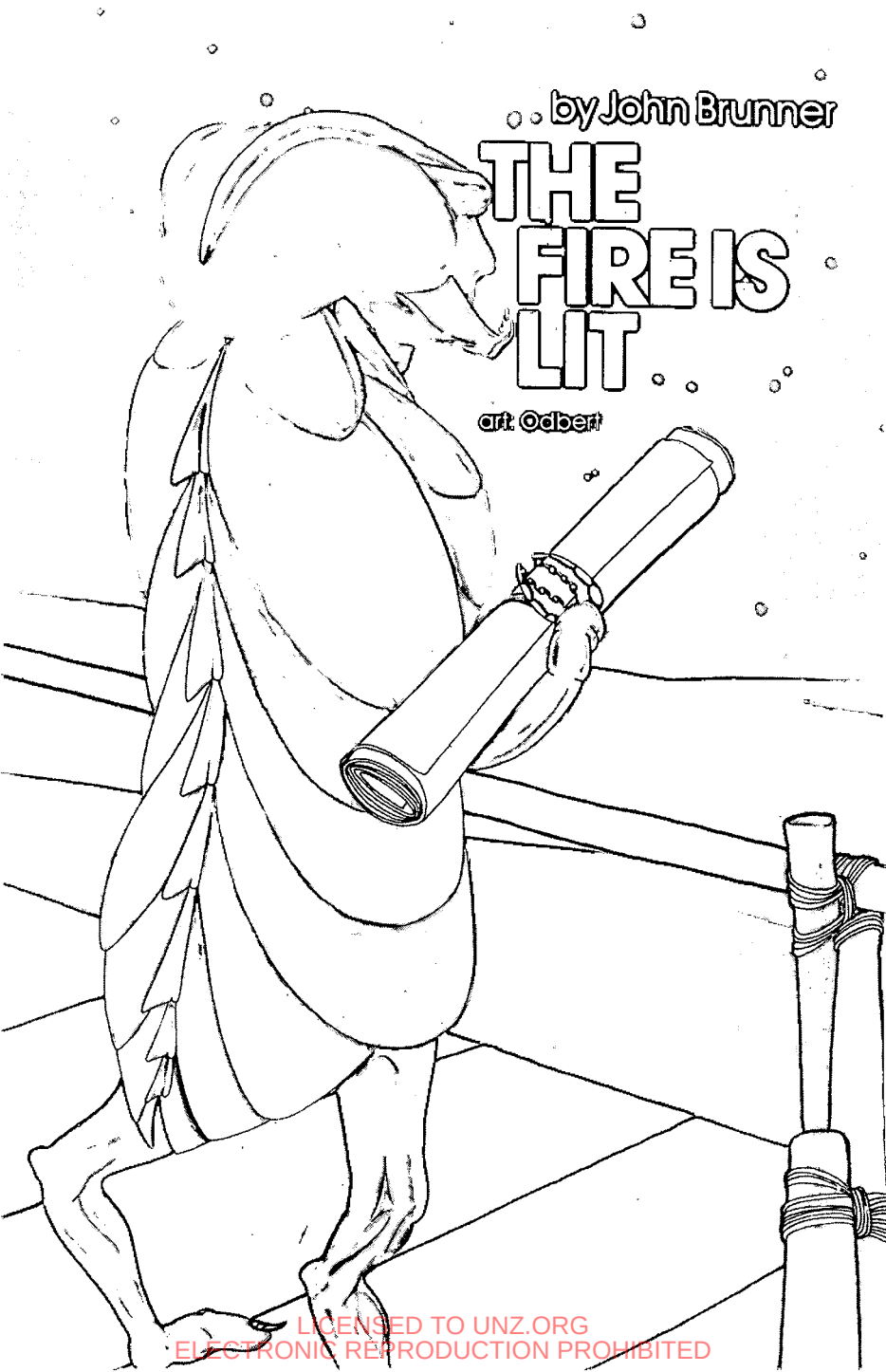

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"The Fire is Lit" is in fact part I of John Brunner's upcoming novel, *The Crucible of Time*, to be published in the summer of 1983 by Ballantine/Del Rey Books. Mr. Brunner's previous novels have included *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up*. This is his third appearance in these pages.

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I

Now the sun was down, the barq was growing tired. The current opposing her was swift, and there was a real risk she might be driven against the rocks that beset the channel and puncture her gas-bladders. After countless attempts to sting her into more vigorous activity, the steersman laid by his goad and grumpily tipped into her maw the last barrelful of the fermented fish and seaweed that served to nourish boat, crew, and passengers alike. Waiting for the belch that would signal its digestion, he noticed Jing watching anxiously from the raft of lashed planks that constituted the deck, and gave a harsh laugh.

"You won't be a-dream before we get where we're bound!" he promised in his coarse northern speech, which the foreigner had scarcely yet attuned his hearing to.

It was hard to realize there was anywhere worth travelling to in this barren landscape. Most of the time the shore was veiled with rags of fog, because the water was so much warmer than the air. What a place to choose for studying the sky! Even though, with the sun setting so much earlier every day, it was possible to believe in the legend that had lured him hither: a night that lasted almost half a year. Not that there could ever be total darkness; here, as everywhere, the Bridge of Heaven—what these northerners called the Maker's Sling—curved in its gleaming arc across the welkin. And, near the horizon, less familiar and altogether awe-inspiring, the New Star was framed in its irregular square of utter black like a jewel on a pad of swart-fur.

But neither that celestial mystery nor the prospect of going hungry was what preyed most on the mind of Ayi-Huat Jing, court astrologer and envoy plenipotentiary of His Most Puissant Majesty Waw-Yint, Lord of the Five Score Islands of Ntah. Compelled by his sworn oath, he had set forth in state a whole miserable year ago, riding the Finest mounq in his master's herd and accompanied by forty prongsmen and ten banners inscribed with his rank and status. His mission was to seek out wise folk beyond the mountains that ringed the Lake of Ntah and inquire of them the meaning of the New Star. His countrymen had long imagined that they understood the reason why the heavens changed—for change they definitely did. He carried with him a fat roll of parchment sheets on which had been copied

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star-maps depicting the sky on the accession-dates of the last score rulers of Ntah and on the date of every eclipse during their reigns. Sixteen stars that in olden times had not been there were shown on the most recent, and marks recorded others that had appeared and faded in a matter of days. But there had never been one so brilliant, or so long-lasting, or in so black a patch of sky. According to the philosophers of Ntah, right action was reflected in heaven, and enough of it earned a diminution of the darkness. Eventually, they promised, the time would come when the heavens would be as bright by night as by day.

And it had happened, and it had ceased, and everyone was grievously disturbed, for blight and plague had followed what should have been a sign of unprecedented good fortune. . . .

Jing's journey had been fruitless so far, but it was not yet doomed to failure. His store of pearlseeds from the Lake was less than half-exhausted, for they grew stranger and more precious as he travelled, exchangeable for more food and longer lodging; and he had clung to his roll of maps even though in all the lands and cities he had visited he had met only one person who appeared to grasp their significance. He had expected students of heaven-lore as dedicated as he, libraries too—albeit in alien script on unfamiliar materials—because tradition told of merchants from Geys and Yown and Elgwim who had brought amazing horns, hides, seeds, and spices along with boastful tales about the riches of their homelands. What he had actually found . . .

Half-starved mud-scrabblers incapable of distinguishing dream from reality, ascribing crop-failure, blight, and murrain to supernatural beings, imagining they could protect themselves by sacrificing most of what remained to them—whereupon, of course, weakness and fatigue allowed dreams to invade their minds ever further. Madness, madness! Why did not everybody know that the heavens boded forth an impersonal record of the world below, neither more nor less? How could anybody, in these modern times, credit a god prepared to launch missiles at random with a view to killing people? The welkin shed messages, not murder!

His whole course since leaving Ntah had been a succession of horrid shocks. Geys, one of the first cities he had planned to visit, stood abandoned and overgrown, for—so he was told—a flaming prong from the sky had struck a nearby hill, and everyone had fled in panic. Moreover, of the escorts and banners who had set out with him (any other of the court officers would have had concubines as well, but Jing was obliged by his calling to accept celibacy) most

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had deserted on finding how squalid was the world beyond the mountains, while not a few had succumbed, as had his mounq, to bad food or foul water.

One alone had survived to accompany him into the branchways of the great city Forb, where first he had encountered learned men as he regarded learning. Yet they were parasites, Jing felt, upon their city's past, disdainful of sky-shown truths, able only to expound concerning inscriptions and petty relics that they claimed to be older than anything elsewhere. Jing was reticently doubtful, but it was impolitic to speak his mind, partly because he was unfluent in the speech of that region, partly because its masters exercised very real power, which he had no wish to see turned against Ntah.

His tallness, and the fact that his companion was taller yet, made him remarkable. The nobility bade him to banquets and festivities as a curiosity. It was a time of dearth, as he had discovered on his way; nonetheless, the fare at such events was lavish. It followed that the lords of Forb must control vast domains—not, however, vast enough to satisfy them, as was apparent from the way they spent all their time maneuvering for advantage over one another, and instructed their interpreters to ply Jing with questions concerning weaponry. They were prepared to descend as far as spreading disease among a rival's crops, than which only the use of wildfire could be baser. Were such monsters to be let loose in the peaceful region of Ntah!

Shuddering, yet determined to pursue his quest, Jing eventually discovered the secret of their dominance. It lay not in their armies nor in their treasuries. It consisted in the deliberate and systematic exploitation of the dreams of those less well-to-do than they. That possibility had never occurred to him, and the language barrier prevented him from comprehending it until a lordling he had disappointed in his hope of brand-new armaments set sacerdotes upon him at his lodgings.

He had frequently seen their like bringing up the tail-end of a noble's retinue, always gaunt in a manner that contrasted greatly with the glistening plumpness of their masters. Initially he had assumed them to be nothing more than servants: scribes, perhaps, or accountants, though it was hard to conceive how such dream-prone starvelings could be relied on.

However, acting more like persons of authority than underlings, these visitors interrogated him concerning Ntah. Pleased to meet anyone prepared to discuss what he thought of as a serious subject, Jing answered honestly, hoping to show that the relationship be-

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tween Ntah and its satrapies, being sustained by trade in information concerning what the heavens portended, was more civilized than rule by force.

Did he not—they responded in shocked tones—acknowledge the example of the Maker of All, who daily surveyed the world with His all-seeing eye, the sun, and nightly dispatched fiery bolts by way of warning that His way must be adhered to on pain of uttermost destruction? Was he not aware that the arc in the sky was the Maker's sling, that the hem of His robe was what lighted the heavens with the glimmer of marvelous draped colors? Then he was in peril of imminent disaster, and were he still to be in Forb when it overtook him, scores-of-scores of innocent people would be caught up in the catastrophe! He must leave the city at once, or they would execute the Maker's will upon him themselves!

Jing's lifelong faith in the beneficence of the universe had been shaken, but he was not about to enter someone else's fever-dream. He did his best to scorn the warning—until the day when his sole surviving escort, Drakh, was set on by an unknown gang and attacked with weapons such as would never have been permitted in Ntah: prongs steeped in the ichor from a rotting carcass, warranted to poison the slightest cut even though it was not deep enough to let out life.

Now Drakh lay delirious beside him, as he had for days past, shivering less at the bitter air than the racking of his sickness. He would have been dead were it not for Jing's landlord—a Shreeban, well accustomed to being shunned by his Forbish neighbors and mocked by their children when he went abroad—who had called a doctor, said to breed the best cleanlickers in the city.

And the doctor had saved not only Drakh's life (so far, Jing amended wryly, for the licker was weakening and the sorbers it passed repeatedly over his wound were turning yellow) but also the mission they had been sent on. Forgetful of his other clients, he had sat for days greedily studying Jing's star-maps, mentioning now and then that such-and-such a one of his forebears had claimed to be older than this or that star: heretical information in Forb, where the Creation was supposed to have been perfect from the Beginning.

How could such dream-spawned nonsense survive the appearance of the New Star, which for a score of nights had outshone the Bridge of Heaven, and still after four years loomed brighter than anything except the sun and moon?

It might well not, explained the doctor. As people became more prosperous and better-fed, so they naturally grew more capable of

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telling dream from fact. This led them to mock the sacerdotes, whose power had been decreasing from generation to generation despite their deliberate self-privation. Now they were reduced to claiming that the New Star was a delusion due to the forces of evil, which—they said—dwelt in that bleak zone from which the Maker had banned all stars as a reminder of the lightless eternity to which He could condemn transgressors. But there were those who maintained that one supremely righteous person was to be born—now: *must* have been—who could hold up a lamp where the Maker had decreed darkness and lead folk out of mental enslavement.

Looking at the glowplants that draped the walls of his rented home, Jing prompted him to more revelations. Was there no one here in the north who studied star-lore?

The chief of them, the doctor said, had taken refuge with the Count of Thorn. Branded by the sacerdotes as victim of a divine curse, that lord had retreated to an arctic fastness where hot springs bubbled out of frozen ground—clear proof, said the sacerdotes, of his commitment to evil, for in the absence of sunlight water could be heated only by fire, the prerogative of the Maker. Hence those who usurped it must be on His adversary's side. Where Thorn had gone, besides, report held that a night might last for half a year, and evil dwelt in darkness, did it not? Yet it was also rumored that those who had followed him were prosperous, while everywhere else epidemics were tramping in the pad-marks of famine. . . .

"There has been some kind of change," the doctor whispered. "My best remedies have ceased to work, and many babies are born dead or twisted. Also there is a taint in this year's nuts, and it seems to drive folk mad. If I had more courage, I too would go where Thorn has gone. . . . Pay me nothing for the care of your man. Promise only to send news of what they have found out in that ice-bound country. It is a place of ancient wisdom, which the sacerdotes interdicted, saying it was dream-stuff. I think they were in error in that also."

Now Jing, so weary he too was having trouble telling dream from fact, was come to Castle Thorn at the head of the warm channel. The fog parted. The moon was rising, gibbous in its third quarter, and as usual its dark part sparkled.

II

If Forb was old, then Castle Thorn was antique. Guarding the

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entrance to a bowl-shaped valley, it loomed as large as a city in its own right—not that its whole bulk could be seen from the outcrop of rock that served it as a wharf, despite the glowplants that outlined it at a distance, for its defenses were elaborate and far-reaching. On either bank bomas trembled, ready to collapse their spiky branches, while masses of clingweed parted only in response to blasting on a high-pitched whistle. Prongsmen came to hitch the barq's mooring-tentacles, accompanied by enormous canifangs.

Just before docking Jing had realized that a range of hills on the horizon was gleaming pure white in the moonshine. He had said, "Snow already?"

And the steersman had grunted, "Always."

So there truly was a place where ice might defy summer. For the first time Jing felt in his inmost tubules how far he was from home.

But there was no time for reflection. A voice was calling to him in city-Forbish: "Hail to the foreigner! I'm told your prongsman is sick. As soon as he's ashore, I'll see what I can do for him. I'm Scholar Twig, by the way."

Twig was a person of advanced years, his tubby shortness — characteristic of these northerners—aggravated by loss of pressure in his bracing tubules, but his expression alert and manner brisk. Grateful, for Twig was the name the doctor had told him to ask for, Jing returned the greeting.

"How you know I coming?" he demanded.

"Oh, you've made news over half the continent," was the prompt reply. "Sorry we don't have anyone around who speaks Ntahish, but until you showed up, most people thought your homeland was just a legend, you know? Say, is it true you have star-maps going back to the Beginning? How soon can I look at them?"

Groping his way through the rush of words, Jing recalled the protocol that attended ambassadors to Ntah.

"Not I must at once pay respect the lord?"

"He's dining in the great hall. You'll meet him in a little. First let me present my colleagues. This is Hedge, this is Bush, this is—"

It was impossible to register so many strangers when he was so fatigued. "But my man-at-arms . . . ?" he ventured.

"Ah, what am I thinking of ? Of course, we must get him and you to quarters right away!"

Detailing some junior aides to carry Drakh, Twig led the way at half a trot.

Jing could have wished to move more slowly, because nothing had prepared him for the luxury he discerned all about him. The very

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stones were warm underpad. The gnarled trunks of the castle were thicker than any he had ever seen, and even at this season they were garlanded with scores of useful secondary plants. Steaming ponds rippled to the presence of fish, while fruit he had not tasted the like of since leaving home dangled from overhanging boughs, and everywhere trailed luminescent vines. Through occasional gaps in the wall, as he ascended branchways in Twig's wake, he caught glimpses of a landscape that reminded him achingly of parts of Ntah. He had thought in terms of a mere clawhold on survival, but the valley must support a considerable population. He saw three villages, each with a score of homes, surrounded by barns and clamps large enough to store food for a year—and that was only on one side of the castle. Amazing! His spirits rose.

And further still when Drakh was laid in a comfortable crotch and a maid brought warm drink. Passing him a huskful, Twig said dryly, "In case you're superstitious about fire, it's untouched by flame. We keep the bags in a hot spring."

Jing's people cared little about fire one way or the other, so he forbore to reply. Whatever its nature, the drink effectively drove away dreams. Meanwhile Twig was inspecting Drakh's licker and saying in disgust, "This should have been changed days ago! Here!" —to the maid—"take it away and bring one of my own at once. They're of the same stock," he added to Jing, "though here we have fewer outlandish poisons they can learn to cope with. Faugh! They do stink, though, don't they, at that stage?"

Now that Jing's perceptions were renewed, he realized that the very air inside the castle stank—something to do with the hot springs, possibly. Never mind. He posed a key question.

"Drakh will live, yes?"

"I'm not a specialist in foreign sicknesses, you know! But . . . yes, very probably. I'll send for juice, which can be poured between his mandibles. Wouldn't care to offer him solid food in his condition."

Jing nodded sober agreement. Reflex might make him bite off his own limbs.

"Are those your maps?" Twig went on, indicating the rolled parchments. "How I want to examine them! But you must be hungry. Come on, I'll show you to the hall."

There, at its very center, the castle revealed its true antiquity. Despite the dense clusters of glowplants that draped the walls, Jing could discern how the ever-swelling boles of its constituent bravetrees had lifted many huge rocks to four or five times his own height. Some of them leaned dangerously inward where the trunks arched

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together. None of the company, however, seemed to be worrying about what might happen if they tumbled down. Perhaps there were no quakes in this frozen zone; the land might stiffen here, as water did, the year around. Yet it was so warm . . .

He postponed thinking about such mysteries in order to take in his surroundings.

The body of the hall was set with carefully-tended trencher-stumps, many more than sufficed for the diners, who were three or at most four score in number. Not only were the stumps plumper than any Jing had seen in Forb; they were plentifully garnished with fruit and fungi and strips of meat and fish, while a channel of hollow stems ran past them full of the same liquor Twig had given him. Entrances were at east and west. At the south end a line of peasants waited for their dole: a slice of trencher-wood nipped off by a contemptuous kitchener and a clawful of what had been dismissed by diners at the north. Jing repressed a gasp. Never, even in Ntah, had he seen such lavish hospitality. It was a wonder that the Count's enemies in Forb had not already marched to deprive him of his riches.

"So many peasants isn't usual," murmured Twig.

"I believe well!" Jing exclaimed. "Plainly did I see villages with land enough and many high barns!"

"Except that on the land the trencher-plants are failing," Twig said, still softly. "Take one of these and transplant it outside, and it turns rotten-yellow. But save your questions until you've fed, or you'll spend a dream-haunted night. Come this way."

Jing complied, completing his survey of the hall. In a space at the center, children as yet unable to raise themselves upright were playing with a litter of baby canifangs, whose claws were already sharp. Now and then that led to squalling, whereupon a nursh would run to the defense of its charge, mutely seeking a grin of approval from the fathers who sat to left and right. Each had a female companion and, if the latter were in bud, made great show of providing for her, but otherwise merely allowed her to bite off a few scraps.

And at the north end sat the Count himself, flanked by two girls, both pretty in the plump northern manner, but neither budding.

The Count was as unlike what Jing had been led to expect as was his castle. He had been convinced by the doctor that he was to meet a great patron of learning, concerned more with wisdom than with material wealth. What he saw was a gross figure so far gone in self-indulgence that he required a sitting-pit, whose only concession to stylish behavior was that instead of biting off his trencher-wood he

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slashed it with a blade the like of which Jing had never seen, made from some dark but shiny and very sharp substance.

"Sit here with my compeers," Twig muttered. "Eat fast. There may not be long to go. He's in a surly mood."

Thinking to make polite conversation, Jing said, "Has two lovely shes, this lord. Is of the children many to him credit?"

The scholar's colleagues, Bush, Hedge, and so on—names doubtless adopted, in accordance with local custom, when they took service with the Count—froze in unison. Twig whispered forcefully, "Never speak of that where he might overhear! No matter how many women he takes, there is no outcome and never has been, except . . . See the cripple?"

Previously overlooked, a girl sat by herself, her expression glum. She leaned to one side as though she had been struck by an assassin's prong. Yet she bore a visible resemblance to the Count, and she was passably handsome by the standards of Ntah, where the mere fact of her being a noble's daughter would have assured her of suitors. She was alone, though, as if she were an unmated or visiting male. Had he again misunderstood some local convention?

Twig was continuing between gobbles of food. "She's the reason I'm here—eat, eat, for pity's sake, because any moment he's going to order up the evening's entertainment, which is bound to include *you*. And over there"—with a nod toward a trio of emaciated persons whom Jing identified with a sinking feeling as sacerdotes—"are a bunch of charlatans who would dearly have liked to sink claws in you before I did except that I put it about I wasn't expecting you before the last boat of autumn in ten days' time. Anyway, Rainbow—who is much brighter than you'd imagine just looking at her—is his sole offspring. Naturally what he wants is a cure for infertility and an assurance that his line won't die out. So our real work keeps getting interrupted while we invent another specious promise for him."

For someone afraid of being overheard, Twig was speaking remarkably freely. But Jing was confused. "You not try read his future from stars?" he hazarded. "You not think possible?"

"Oh, it may well be! But before we can work out what the sky is telling us, we must first understand what's going on up there. My view, you see, is that fire above and fire below are alike in essence, so that until we comprehend what fire *can* do, we shan't know what it *is* doing, and in consequence . . . Oh-oh. He's stopped eating, which means the rest of us have to do the same. If you haven't had enough

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to keep you dream-free, I can smuggle something to your quarters later. Right now, though, you're apt to be what's served him next!"

In fact it didn't happen quite so quickly. With a spring like a stabberclaw pouncing out of jungle overgrowth, a girl draped in glitterweed erupted from the shadow. She proved to be a juggler, and to the accompaniment of a shrill pipe she made full use of the hall's height by tossing little flying creatures into the air and luring them back in graceful swooping curves.

"She came in on the first spring boat," Twig muttered, "and she is going away tomorrow—considerably richer! Even though she didn't cure the Count's problem, he must have had a degree of pleasure from her company. . . ."

Certainly the performance improved the Count's humor; when it was over, he joined in the clacking of applause.

"We have a foreign guest among us!" he roared at last. "Let him make himself known!"

"Do exactly as I do!" Twig instructed. "First you—"

"No!" Jing said with unexpected resolve. "I make like in *my* country to *my* lord!"

And he strode forward fully upright, not letting the least hint of pressure leak from his tubules. Arriving in front of the Count, he paid him the Ntahish compliment of overtopping him yet shielding his mandibles.

"I bring greeting from Ntah," he said in his best Forbish. "Too, I bring pearlseeds, finest of sort, each to grow ten score like self. Permit to give as signing gratitude he let share knowledge of scholars here!"

And extended what was in fact his best remaining seed.

For an instant the Count seemed afraid to touch it. Then one of his treasurers, who stood by, darted forward to examine it. He reported that it was indeed first-class.

Finally the Count condescended to take it into his own claw, and a murmur of surprise passed around the company. Jing realized he must have committed another breach of etiquette. But there was no help for that.

"You have no manners, fellow," the Count grunted. "Still, if your knowledge is as valuable as your pearlseed, you may consider yourself welcome. I'll talk with you when Twig has taught you how to address a nobleman!"

He hauled himself to his pads and lumbered off.

"Well, you got away with that," Twig murmured, arriving at Jing's

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side. "But you've pressurized a lot of enemies. Not one of *them* would dare to stand full height before the Count, and they claim to have authority from the Maker Himself!"

Indeed, the three sacerdotes he had earlier designated charlatans were glowering from the far side of the hall, as though they would cheerfully have torn Jing limb from torso.

III

"And here is where we study the stars," said Lady Rainbow.

It had been a long trek to the top of this peak, the northernmost of those girdling the round valley. Their path had followed the river, which eventually created the channel used by boats from the south. It had not one source but many, far underground or beyond the hills, and then it spread out to become a marsh from which issued bubbles of foul-smelling gas. Passage through a bed of sand cleansed it, and thereafter it was partitioned into many small channels to irrigate stands of fungi, useful trees, and pastures on which grazed meatimals and furnimals. Also it filled the castle fish-ponds, and even after such multiple exploitation it was warm enough to keep the channel ice-free save in the dead of winter. The whole area was a marvel and a mystery. It was even said that farther north yet there were pools of liquid rock that bubbled like water, but Jing was not prepared to credit that until he saw it with his own eyes.

Despite her deformity, Rainbow had set a punishing pace, as though trying to prove something to herself, and Twig had been left far behind on the rocky path. He was in a bad temper anyway, for he had hoped to show off his laboratory first, where he claimed he was making amazing transformations by the use of heat; but Rainbow had insisted on coming here before sunset, and Jing did want to visit the observatory before all else.

However, he was finding it a disappointment. It was a mere depression in the rock. Walbushes had been trained to make a circular windbreak, and their rhizomes formed crude steps enabling one to look over the top for near-horizon observations. A pumptree whose taproot reached down to a stream of hot water grew in the center, where on bitter nights one might lean against it for warmth. A few lashed-together poles indicated important lines-of-sight. Apart from that—nothing.

At first Jing just wandered about, praising the splendid view here offered of Castle Thorn and the adjoining settlements. There were

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more than he had imagined: about a score. But when Twig finally reached the top, panting, he could contain himself no longer.

"Where your instruments?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Oh, we bring them up as required," was the blank reply. "What do you do—keep them in a chest on the spot?"

Thinking of the timber orrery that had been his pride and joy, twice his own height and moved by a pithed water-worm whose mindless course was daily diverted by dams and sluices so as to keep the painted symbols of the sun, moon, and planets in perfect concordance with heaven, Jing was about to say, "We don't bother with instruments small enough to carry!"

But it would have been unmannerly.

Sensing his disquiet, Twig seized on a probable explanation. "I know what you're tempted to say: with all that steam rising from our warm pools, how can anyone see the stars? You just wait until the winter wind from the north spills down this valley! It wipes away mist like a rainstorm washing out tracks in mud! Of course, sometimes it brings snow, but for four-score nights in any regular year we get the most brilliant sight of heaven anyone could wish for. And as for the auroras . . ."

Touching Rainbow familiarly, he added, "And you'll be here to watch it all, won't you?"

"You must forgive Twig," she said, instantly regal. "He has known me since childhood and often treats me as though I were still a youngling. But it's true I spend most of my time here during the winter. I have no greater purpose in life than to decipher the message of the stars. I want to know why I'm accursed!"

Embarrassed by her intensity, Jing glanced nervously at her escorting prongsman, without whom she was forbidden to walk abroad, and wished he could utter something reassuring about Twig's abilities. But the words would have rung hollow. He had pored over Jing's star-maps, cursing his failing sight, which he blamed on excessive study of the sun—in which Jing sympathized with him, for his own eyes were not as keen as they had been—and exclaimed at their detail, particularly because they showed an area of the southern sky that he had never seen. All he had to offer in exchange, though, were a few score parchments bearing scrappy notes about eclipses and planetary orbits, based on the assumption that the world was stationary—which had been superseded in Ntah ten score years ago—and some uninspiring remarks about the New Star. It was clear that his real interest lay in what he could himself affect,

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in his laboratory, and his vaunted theory of the fire above was plausibly a scrap from a childhood dream. Jing was unimpressed.

He said eventually, "Lady, where I from is not believed curses any more. We hold, as sky tend to fill more with star, so perfectness of life increase down here." He damned his clumsiness in this alien speech.

"That's all very well if you admit the heavens change," said Twig bluffly. "But we're beset with idiots who are so attached to their dreams, they can go on claiming they don't, when a month of square meals would show them better!"

He meant the sacerdotes, who—as Jing had learned—had been sent to Castle Thorn unwillingly, in the hope of winning the Count back to their "true faith." They were growing desperate at their lack of success even among the peasants, because everyone in this valley was well enough nourished to tell dream from fact. One rumor had it that they were spreading blight on the trencher-plants, but surely no one could descend that far! Although some of the lords of Forb . . .

Disregarding Twig, Rainbow was addressing Jing again. "You say I can't be cursed?"

"Is not curse can come from brightness, only darkness. More exact, is working out pattern—I say right *pattern*, yes?—coming toward ideal, and new thing have different shape. You noble-born. You perhaps sign of change in world."

"But if change is coming, nobody will prepare to meet it," Twig said, growing suddenly serious. "With the trunks of Forb and other ancient cities rotting around them, people shout ever louder that it can't be happening. They'd rather retreat from reality into the mental mire from which—one supposes—our ancestors must have emerged. You don't think Lady Rainbow is accursed. Well, I don't either, or if she is, then it's a funny kind of curse, because I never met a girl with a sharper mind than hers! But most people want everything, including their children, to conform to the standards of the past."

"My father's like that," Rainbow sighed.

"He's a prime example," Twig agreed, careless of the listening prongsman. "He thinks always in terms of tomorrow copying today. But our world—I should say our continent—is constantly in flux: when it's not a drought, it's a plague; when it's not a murrain it's a population shift . . . Where you come from, Jing, how does your nation stay stable even though you admit the heavens themselves can change? I want to know the secret of that stability!"

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"I want to know what twisted my father!" snapped Rainbow. "Bent outwardly I may be, but he must be deformed within!"

Aware of being caught up in events he had not bargained for, Jing thought to turn Rainbow a compliment. He said, "But is still possible to him descendants, not? Surprise to me lady is not match often with persons of quality, being intelligent and of famous family."

Later, Twig explained that to speak of a noblewoman's being paired was something one did not do within hearing of the party concerned. For the time being he merely changed the subject with an over-loud interruption.

"Now come and see what's really interesting about the work we're doing!"

Yet, although she declined to accompany them to the laboratory, the lady herself seemed more flattered than upset.

This time their path wound eastward to the place where the hot river broke out of shattered rocks. Alongside it a tunnel led into the core of a low hill, issuing an appalling stench. Yet the heat and humidity reminded Jing of home, and inside the tunnel were adequate glowplants and twining creepers to cling to when the going became treacherous. Sighing, he consented to enter.

When he was half-choking in the foul air, they emerged into a cavern shaped like a vast frozen bubble, at the center of which water gushed up, literally boiling. Here Hedge, Bush, and the rest were at work, or, more exactly, directing a group of ill-favored peasants to do their work for them. They paused to greet their visitor, and Twig singled out a husky peasant, who sank to half his normal height in the cringing northern fashion.

"This is Keepfire! Tell Master Jing what you think of this home of yours, Keepfire!"

"Oh, it's very good, very safe," the peasant declared. "Warm in the worst winter, and food always grows. Better here than over the hill, sir!"

Jing was prepared to accept that. Anything must be preferable to being turned loose to fend for oneself in the barren waste to the north, where no plants grew and there was a constant risk from icefaws and snowbelongs, which colonized the bodies of their prey to nourish their brood-mass. Twig had described the process in revolting detail.

Having surveyed the cavern and having made little sense of what he saw, Jing demanded, "What exact you do here?"

"We're testing whatever we can lay claws on, first in hot water,

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then on rock to protect it from flame, then in flame itself. We make records of the results, and from them we hope to figure out what fire actually can do."

To Jing, fire was something viewed from far off and to be avoided, and flame was a conjurer's trick to amuse children on celebration days. More cynically than he had intended—but he was growing weary and dreams were invading his mind again—he said, "You are proving something it does?"

Stung, Twig reached up to a rocky ledge and produced a smooth heavy lump that shone red-brown.

"Seen anything like this before? Or this?"

Another strange object, more massive and yellower.

Realization dawned. "Ah, these are metals, yes? You find in water?" Sometimes in the streams which fed the Lake of Ntah placer-nuggets turned up, softer than stone ought to be, which after repeated hammering showed similar coloration.

"Not at all! This is what we get when we burn certain plants and then reheat their ash. Don't you think some of the essence of fire must have remained in these lumps? Look how they gleam! But I should have asked—what do you already know about fire?"

"Is to us not well-known. In dry land is danger for plants, homes, people. But in Ntah is air damp same like here. Is down in this cave possible flame?"

His doubt was plain. Twig snorted.

"I thought so! The more I hear, the more I become convinced we must be the only people in the world seriously investigating fire. Either they think it's blasphemous because it's reserved to the heavens, or they're as wrong as you about the way it works. Let a humble peasant show you better. Keepfire, make a flame for the visitor!"

Chuckling, the peasant rushed to a recess in the cavern wall. From it he produced articles that Jing's poor sight failed to make out in the dimness.

"Long before anyone came here from as far south as Forb," Twig said softly, "Keepfire's ancestors were priests of a cult that now has vanished—based on dreams, of course. But they found out some very practical techniques."

"What he do?"

"It's so simple you wouldn't believe it. I didn't when I first came here. He uses dry fungus-spores, and a calamar soaked in fish-oil, and two rocks. Not just ordinary rock but a kind that has some of the fire-essence in it. Watch!"

Something sparkled. A flame leapt up, taller than he, and Jing

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jumped back in alarm. He risked tumbling into the hot pool; Twig caught him, uttering a sour laugh.

"Doesn't that impress you?"

"I guess so . . ." Jing was trembling. "But what to do with? Is not same fire and in—*as* in sky! Is under the ground!"

Twig said with authority, "The idea that fire belongs to the sky is false. Using it, we've made—not grown but made—things that were never in the world before."

"Did you make Count's blade?" Jing ventured, prepared to be impressed.

"Oh, no. That's a natural rock you find a lot of around here. But it too must have fire in its essence, or heat, at any rate. It seems to be like this stuff." Twig reached to another ledge and brought down a clawful of smooth, transparent objects shaped like half a raindrop, most bluish, some greenish, one or two clear. "The peasants' children use these for playthings. They hate me because I take away the best ones for more important use. On a fine day you can catch sunfire with them and set light to a dry calamar or a dead leaf. What better proof could there be of my opinions? Look, here's a particularly clear one!"

To Jing's touch the droplet was relatively cool, so he could not imagine how fire could be trapped within. All of a sudden, however, as he was inspecting it, he noticed something remarkable. At a certain distance he could see his claw through it, only enlarged.

"It make big!" he breathed.

"Oh, that too! But it's no use holding it up to the sky. Every youngling in the valley must have tried that, and me too, I confess. But it won't make the moon or stars any clearer, and as for looking at the sun—well!"

"I can have, please? Not to start fires. Is good for look my star-maps."

Twig started. He said in an altered voice, "Now why didn't I think of that? But of course I never saw maps like yours before, with such fine detail. Sure, take it. We keep finding them all the time. Now we'd best get back to the castle."

He padded away, exuding an aura of annoyance.

This was no astrologer: Jing was satisfied on that point. Maybe when it came to trying this or that in a fire, Twig's record-keeping might be accurate, but given the fact that he could overlook such an obvious use for a magnifying drop, it seemed unlikely. Anyhow, what value could his data have? It was inconceivable that fire in heaven could be identical to fire underground!

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So perhaps there were several kinds of fire? And surely there must be *some* way of enlarging the heavens if it could be done at close range . . . ?

Jing sighed heavily. He had to make an immediate decision: whether to remain here in the hope that studying the stars uninterruptedly for longer than he had imagined possible would bring unexpected insights, or to leave by the final autumn boat. But the continent was already in the grip of winter; he could scarcely reach home any sooner if he left now than if he stayed until spring. And Waw-Yint would certainly not forgive him for abandoning his mission. He was not one to be bought off with such petty marvels as a magnifying drop. True, he was old, and by now might well be dead—

Shocked at his own disloyalty, Jing firmly cancelled such thoughts. No, he must remain, and if necessary next year he must carry on beyond the ocean, riding one of the half-legendary giant barqs of which they spoke in Yown and Forb . . . if they were not compounded of dreams.

Besides, this magnifier had seized his imagination: a perfect tool for astrologers, it was hampered only by its present imperfection. He had been brought up to believe that perfection inhered in everything, even people; it needed only to be sought out.

Just before entering the castle again, Twig turned to him and said bluffly, "Put what I know about the world below together with what you know about the sky, and we might get somewhere one of these days, right? Shall we try?"

It was a formal invitation not just to collaborate but also to make friends. Jing felt obliged to treat the question as such, despite his reservations concerning Twig's researches. They locked claws accordingly.

Later, Jing reflected it was good that they had concluded their compact at that juncture, for the first person to meet them within the castle reported Drakh's death; the best of Twig's cleanlickers had failed to purify his wound. Grief at being shorn of his last Ntahish companion might have driven him to dreamness and made him reject Twig-friend because of Twig-physician. Yet no blame could attach save to those who had stabbed Drakh a month's journey ago.

When, in compliance with local custom, they consigned Drakh's remains to a pullulating pond surrounding a handsome blazetree, Twig spoke much about loneliness and isolation, and Jing was touched and grateful.

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As though the funeral were a significant occasion, the Maker's Sling delivered a cast of long bright streaks across the zenith.

But that was apt to happen any night.

IV

Next day distraught peasants came crying that a snowbelong had killed a child from the farthest-outlying village, and the Count hauled himself out of his sitting-pit and set off to hunt it down with hoverers and canifangs. Twig predicted it might be several days before he returned, and Jing looked forward not only to improving his Forbish but also to cleansing his mind of the nostalgic dreams that, since the death of Drakh, threatened to overwhelm him.

Taking advantage of his absence, however, the sacerdotes promptly summoned Jing to their chapel, an enclosure within the north wall of the castle, which they had been granted because the Count, despite being well-fed, was sufficiently at the mercy of his dreams to half-believe their dogma.

"You'll have to go, I'm afraid," said Twig, sighing.

"Here I thought had they no power. How they force me?"

"Hmm! It isn't quite like that. True, the Count's power is absolute here, and the people, if they have a religion at all, adhere to superstitions even more absurd than the sacerdotes', though some of their knowledge, especially where fire is concerned . . . Excuse me. The point is, the Count has opened up this place to trade with the south, and that means contact with southern believers. Most of the summer there are at least half a score of the faithful here, and the sacerdotes incite them to put pressure on the Count, who's growing senile. What I'm afraid of is that sooner or later he may conclude that they're right after all, and hoping to escape the curse, he'll go whining to them for forgiveness, and you can guess what'll become of the rest of us then! In any event they're getting bolder, and if you don't obey their summons, you could well find your food poisoned or a prong stuck in your back."

Jing would have dismissed the idea as ridiculous were it not for what had happened to Drakh. Sensing his dismay, Twig added, "If it's any comfort, though, you should bear in mind that it would be a far greater coup for them to convert you than kill you. They may be a nuisance, but they're not likely to be a menace."

At least these sacerdotes were less determined to execute what

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they held to be the Maker's will than were their counterparts at Forb. They greeted him politely as he entered the chapel, which was decorated with makeshift symbols: the Sling, of course, shiny with glitterweed; a pile of the seared rocks, which were held to be what the Sling cast but looked much like any other rock except for superficial melt-marks; and some rather repulsive models of victims of the Maker's wrath, struck down from on high.

For a while there was ordinary conversation about his homeland and his various travels. Jing answered as best he could, wishing he had asked Twig their names, for they had not offered them, and direct inquiry might be rude. There were a chief, a middle, and a junior; that would have to do.

Finally the chief broached the main subject. He said, "What god is worshipped in your land?"

"Most people not," Jing said. "Is some old and sick folk think of pleasing gods, but to rest of us is imaginary thing. We tell easily dream from fact, same as here."

"You don't believe in a creator at all?" the middle one demanded. "You don't think the world *was* created?"

"Is certain," Jing said. "But very long past. We think"—he groped for words—"world is made as path for us to go on as we choose. Important is to learn from sky whether we take right or wrong way. Creator is watch us, but not for punish, not for want offerings, just for see how done by us. When well done, more star come in sky. Perhaps in furthest future all sky is starry, and all here below walk in light all time."

He hated to give this bald account of the system Ntahish philosophers had evolved over many score-of-score years, but it was the best he could manage.

The junior, who was better-favored than his colleagues, spoke up eagerly. "But the New Star did light the whole of the night sky! For a while it could even be seen by day! Do you think—?"

"There is no New Star!" the chief snapped. "It's an illusion!"

Humbly the junior said, "Sir, I'm aware of that. But with respect it seems our visitor is not. I only wish to learn what explanation his people have—well—invented for it."

Gruffly, the chief granted permission for the question.

"We not have explanation," Jing admitted. "Never saw so much bright star appear in past, not at any rate to stay so long. In Ntah is no great change to explain it. Here why I am sent to ask in foreign lands."

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"You actually imagine there have been other new stars?" asked the middle one. "Dream-stuff!"

"Can show you true. I bring copies of old sky-maps to make proof. Is also much difference in time of rise and set from old days. Will explain meaning of maps when want you!"

"Your star-maps," said the chief sacerdote coldly, "are of no interest to us. Any apparent change in the heavens must be due to the working of evil forces passing off dreams as reality. Bring your maps, yes, but so that we can burn them and save other people from your mad ideas!"

That was more than Jing could stand. Rising to his full height in the most disrespectful manner possible, he said, "Is your belief, anyone make use of fire is companion of evil, yes? You just propose that same! I say plain: I better tell dream from true than you! And anyway, is not place of you to order foreigner, guest of Count!"

The middle one scowled a warning, aware that his chief had gone too far. After a moment the latter rose, glowering.

"The Count is not yet back! He is a reckless hunter and may well not come back at all! And if he doesn't, then we'll see about *you!*"

The chief stormed away.

Greatly distressed, the junior sacerdote escorted Jing to the exit, muttering apologies. And as soon as they were out of hearing, he did the most amazing thing. Leaning confidentially close, he whispered, "Sir, *I* would like to see your sky-maps! Since coming here, I no longer think the heavens never change! I think new stars signal the birth of righteous persons, and the most righteous of all must now be among us!"

Before Jing could recover from his startlement, the junior was gone.

At first Jing was inclined to hasten straight back to Twig, but a moment's reflection changed his mind. Even in peaceful Ntah there were such things as court intrigues, and while in his profession he had been largely insulated from them, he was well aware of the need to protect himself. Given the Count's absence, might his daughter offer a degree of help, or at least advice? From a passing prongsman he inquired the way to her ladyship's quarters.

They proved to be in a large and comfortable bower on the west side of the castle, where she sat poring over a table of Ntahish mathematical symbols he had prepared for her. He was relieved to find she did not resent interruption; on the contrary, she declared herself delighted and sent her maids to bring refreshments.

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"I'm so pleased you're here!" she exclaimed, speaking as directly as a man. "Here at Castle Thorn, I mean. I'd never say so in Twig's hearing, but I long ago learned all he had to teach me about the sky, and it didn't even include the idea that the sun stands still while we move around it. It makes everything so much simpler when you look at things that way, doesn't it? I look forward to having you as my constant companion at the observatory this winter."

"To me will much pleasure," Jing affirmed. "But if to explain correct meaning I want say, must I very more Forbish learn."

"I'm sure you'll learn quickly, and if you have problems, turn to me. I have little enough to occupy me," she added in a bitter tone.

Thus emboldened, Jing said, "Is of problem I come now. See you . . ." And he summed up his encounter with the sacerdotes.

"You're right to beware of them!" Rainbow asserted. "How can I but hate them for claiming that my birth was the sign of a curse on my father? For him I have small love either, since he sent my mother away, but at least he had the kindness to bring me with him when he left Forb instead of abandoning or even killing me, and he provided for my education by offering Twig a refuge here. Without *him* I think I would have lost myself in dreamland. If only he hadn't more or less quit studying the sky when his eyes began to fail . . . Still, he had only himself to blame for looking directly at the sun. He told you, did he, how he saw dark markings on it?"

"I hear of it in Forb, but he not say himself."

"Do you think it's credible? Sometimes when there's thin grey cloud, so the sun doesn't hurt your eye, I've imagined that I too . . . But what do you think? Is it possible for dark to appear out of bright, as bright may out of dark?"

"Is not in the knowledge of my people. Where I lived, is either clear bright day-sky or thick rain-cloud. Was to me new, see sort of thin cloud you mention."

"Is that so?" She leaned forward, fascinated. "I should ask you about your homeland, shouldn't I, rather than about stars and numbers all the time? Have you been away long? Do you miss it very much? Is it a place of marvels? I suspect it must be, particularly compared to this lonely backwater. . . . But quickly, before my maids return: I'll assign you one of my own prongsmen to replace Drakh. I'll say it's because you need someone to practice Forbish with. I'll give you Sturdy. With him at your side you need fear nothing from the sacerdotes."

"Am not sure all to be feared," Jing muttered, and recounted the odd behavior of the junior sacerdote.

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"Interesting! That must be Shine you're talking about. I realized long ago he was too sensible to deprive himself of the good fare we can offer, but I'd no idea he'd become so independent-minded. Cultivate him! It could serve us well to have a split in the enemy's ranks."

Jing noted in passing how swiftly she had begun to say "us."

"Tonight in hall sit with me," Rainbow continued. "I'll feed you from my own trencher-stump. That is, unless you're afraid of offending my father's wives. But they have no power; he takes and dismisses them according to his mood, and until one of them buds, I remain his sole heir. Now here come my attendants. Let's change the subject. You were telling me about your homeland. The very weather is different there, I think you said. In what way?"

With infinite gratitude Jing slipped into memory, purging the risk of dangerous dreams. He described the sub-tropical climate of Ntah, and then progressed to a general account of the Lake and its environs—the creeper-bridges stranding out from island to island; the Lord's palace at the center, a huge tree sixty score years old, the sides of which were draped with immense waxy blossoms that scented the air for miles around; the western cataract, where a broad river plunged over a cliff and kept the lake from growing stagnant; the delectable flesh of the nut called hoblaq, enclosed in a shell too hard for anyone to break, which people gathered on the hillside and pitched into the river so that the falls would do the work for them and send the shattered kernels drifting across the water for everybody to enjoy; the game animals, large and small, which haunted the copses, the shallows, and the watermeadows; the venomous insects and noxious berries, which were obliging enough to advertise themselves by distinctive coloring so that even children might avoid them; and of course his prized observatory, with its orrery and its transits and its levels and its gnomons and its great trumpet-shaped viewing-funnel of dried pliobark, which blanked off all light from below and permitted the eye to adjust completely to its task of registering the stars . . .

"And we think we're advanced!" Rainbow cried. "How could you have brought yourself to leave such a place?"

It was a question Jing was to ask himself countless times during the next few months, particularly after the last boat of autumn had come and gone and the sun had set for the last time in six score days.

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The slopes and branchways of the castle were eerie in the long darkness, although the glowplants drew enough warmth from underground to provide faint luminance right through until spring. They were, Jing thought, like a model of his mind, a pattern matching himself alone as the sky matched the entire world. Some areas were darkly red, like those deep-lying mental strata concerned with fundamental processes such as digestion, where one might venture only in emergency and at the cost of immense concentration. Others were pinker and brighter, like the levels where one might issue commands to oneself about sitting or standing, walking or running—or fighting. Others again tended to be bluish, like the dreams harking back to childhood incomprehension of the world, which could so easily overpower a person when weary, sick, frightened, grief-stricken, or undernourished, and which sacerdotes and other fools deliberately cultivated because they had never learned to prize dreams less than memory. Yet other levels were greenish as memory was; more still gleamed clear yellow like imagination; and just a few, including the great hall itself, shone with the white brightness of reality.

Contrary to what the chief sacerdote had hoped, the Count had a successful hunt, and his prongsmen dragged back enough snowbelong meat to garnish a score of winter meals. But he had fallen into a crevasse and ruptured some of his interior tubules. More bloated than ever, he summoned Jing to attend him under the misapprehension that all foreigners were skilled physicians. Jing, having seen a similar case when an elderly man slipped on the approach to the cataract at Ntah, offered suggestions, which appeared to give relief from pain, if nothing more. Impressed, the Count made a vague attempt to engage in debate concerning the patterns in the sky, but after that he seemed to lose interest.

Much the same could be said of Twig. Once he realized that Jing's star-maps were not only in an alien script but also based on a sun-centered convention, he gave up. It was not because he shared the sacerdotes' conviction that the sun was only the Maker's Eye and therefore could not be the focus around which the planets revolved; enough observations had been amassed here in the north to indicate to him how far superior the Ntahish system was. No, the problem arose from a wholly unexpected source: Keepfire.

As the story came back to Jing, the elderly peasant, whose ances-

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tors had been a priesthood, was angered by the fact that certain substances resisted change in his hottest flames. He therefore set about interrogating the oldest of his kinfolk in search of ways to make them even hotter. Siting a fire at the spot where a crack in the rock, leading to the outside, was aligned with the prevailing wind made the fuel blaze up violently. Winds, though, were unpredictable; how to cause an artificial one? Well, when a barq's bladder burst . . . Suppose one made a giant bladder out of hide? But that wasn't the answer by itself. It needed to be filled, and refilled, and refilled, and . . . How about tethered hoverers?

The problem engaged Twig's total attention. Sighing, Jing left him to get on with it, feeling lonelier than ever.

In absolute contrast, Rainbow was desperate for the information contained in Jing's maps. The regular winter wind had set in, but actual star-study was out of the question; there were constant snow-flurries, and whenever the gale died down, the water was warm enough to generate fog. Jing, though, was in no mood to complain. He was taking a long while to adjust to the loss of his last Ntahish companion, and until he had rid his mind of intrusive dreams, he was content to tutor Rainbow. He was greatly impressed by her quick wits. She had realized at once how much simpler a sun-centered system made it to keep track of the outer planets and the inner one, which was so rarely visible. Moreover, when she ran across a technical term in Ntahish for which she knew no equivalent, she simply adopted it. Within a few days she was using words nobody else at Castle Thorn would have understood.

Except one . . .

It astonished Jing when the young sacerdote Shine lived up to his promise and shyly came to beg a sight of the star-maps. Instantly fascinated, he set about matching the names they bore with their Forbish equivalents. Soon his colleagues were openly quarrelling with him. One evening only the authority of the Count prevented a fight from breaking out in the hall.

Quite without intention, Jing thereupon found himself the center of interest throughout the castle. He could go nowhere without some wench's accosting him to demand a favorable horoscope for her family, or a prongsman's wanting to be told he would be promoted chief-of-guard over his rivals, or peasants' seeking a cure for trencher-plant blight—though luckily the latter had been less virulent of late.

As soon as the air cleared, therefore, he and Rainbow went to the observatory as often as possible. All Twig's extravagant claims

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proved justified. The stars shone down sharp as stabberclaws, from a background so nearly black Jing almost could not believe it. Even the square surrounding the New Star was barely a contrast to the rest. As for the Bridge of Heaven, it gleamed like a treasury of pearlseeds.

A faint suspicion trembled on the edge of his awareness. But it refused to come clear as he strove with chill-stiff claws to prepare for the portion of the sky not seen from Ntah maps and tables as exact as those he had brought from home. Often dreams threatened to engulf his consciousness, and then he had to break off and embrace the warm trunk of the pumptree until he regained his self-possession.

It was a marvelous juncture for observation, though. Time had brought all five outer planets into the same quadrant—an event that might or might not have significance. A year ago he would have insisted that it must; now he was growing skeptical. But there was reddish Swiftyouth, currently in a retrograde phase of the kind which had led Ntahish astrologers to center their system on the sun; there was Steadyman, almost white, lagging behind; there was Stolidchurl, somewhat yellower; there were Stumpalong and Sluggard, both faintly green, the latter markedly less bright . . .

Why were there moving bodies in the sky, and of such different sizes? And why were they so outnumbered by the stars? Shine was eager to explain the teaching he had been brought up to: that each corresponded with a region of the world, and moved faster or slower according to whether the people of that region obeyed the Maker's will. One day they would all rise together at the same time as the sun rose in eclipse, and—

Patiently Jing pointed out the fallacies in his argument. Clacking his mandibles, he went away to think the matter through. It was obviously news to him that a solar eclipse was not simultaneously observed everywhere, a fact one might account for only by invoking distances beside which Jing's journey from Ntah to Castle Thorn was like a single step. It hurt the mind to think in such terms, as Rainbow wryly put it when he showed her how to calculate the circumference of the world by comparing star-ascensions at places on the same meridian but a known distance apart. He found the remark amusing; it was the first thing that had made him laugh in a long while.

Plants that swelled at noon and shrank at midnight were used in Ntah to keep track of time even if the sky was clouded over. When-

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ever it snowed, Jing occupied himself by hunting the castle high and low for anything that might exhibit similar behavior. The effect the long night was having on him was disquieting; without sunlight to prompt him back into rationality, he found dreams creeping up on him unawares even when he was not hungry, tired, or upset.

He was engaged in this vain quest when he was hailed by a familiar voice. Turning, he saw Twig, filthy from pads to mandibles with blackish smears.

"*There* you are! I was surprised not to find you in Rainbow's quarters. They tell me you two have been very close lately!"

For an instant Jing was minded to take offense. But Twig knew nothing of his being compelled to celibacy so long as Waw-Yint lived. And lately he had felt pangs of regret at not having left offspring behind in Ntah. Rainbow and Shine were about half his age; talking to them, he had realized how much happier he would have been had he passed on his knowledge to a son and daughter before setting forth on his travels. . . .

Before he could reply, however, Twig had charged on, plainly bursting to impart information. "Take a look at this!" he exclaimed, proffering something in his left claw. Jing complied, hoping it was not something as irrelevant as Twig's last "great discovery": a new kind of metal, grayish and cold, which broke when it was dropped. This one, however, he thought he recognized.

"Ah! You found another magnifying drop. It's especially clear and fine, I must say."

"Not found," Twig announced solemnly. "Made."

"How? Out of what?"

"Sand, would you believe? Yes, the same sand you find beside the hot marsh! Keepfire's flames are getting better and hotter—oh, I know people are complaining about the smell, but that's a small price to pay!—and this time he's excelled himself ! And there's more. Look at *this!*"

He produced what he had in his other claw. It was of similar material, equally clear but twice the size.

"Hold them up together—no, I don't mean *together,* I mean—Oh, like this!" Twig laid claws on Jing in a way the latter would never normally have tolerated, but it was certainly quicker than explaining. "Now look at something through both of them, and move them apart or together until you see it clearly. Got it?"

Jing grew instantly calm. There presented to his eye was an image of Twig's head, albeit upside-down . . . but larger, and amazingly sharp except around the edges.

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Very slowly, he lowered and examined the two pieces of glass. They were not, as he had first assumed, in the regular half-droplet shape; they were like two of the natural kind pressed together but considerably flatter.

"You made these?" he said slowly.

"Yes, yes!" And then, with a tinge of embarrassment: "Well—Keepfire made them, under Bush's supervision. All I was hoping for was better magnifying drops. I never expected that when you put one behind another you'd get even more enlargement the wrong way up! At first I thought I was in dreamland, you know? But you agree it works?"

"Yes—yes, no doubt of it!"

"Right! Let's go and look at stars!"

"It's snowing. That's why I'm here."

"Oh, is it? Oh. Then—"

"Then we'll just have to force ourselves to wait until it blows over. But I promise you, friend Twig, I'm as anxious as you are to inspect the heavens with such amazing aids!"

The moment the weather cleared, he and Twig and Rainbow and Shine—for the secret was so explosive, it had to be shared—along with Sturdy, who hated coming here in the cold and dark, plodded to the observatory, forcing themselves not to make a premature test. Then it turned out that the lenses had misted over, and they had to find something dry enough to wipe them with, and . . .

"Jing first," Twig said. "You're the most knowledgeable."

"But surely you as the discoverer—"

"The credit is more Keepfire's than mine! Besides"—in a near-whisper—"my eyes aren't keen enough any more."

"My lady," Jing began. Rainbow snapped at him.

"Do as Twig says!"

"Very well. Where shall I look first?" He was shaking, not from cold but because excitement threatened to release wild dreams to haunt his mind like savage canifangs.

"At Steadyman," she said, pointing where the gaps in the cloud were largest. "If there's a reason why some stars are wanderers, it may be they are especially close to us. You've taught me that our own world whirls in space. Maybe that's another world like ours."

It was a good, bright, and altogether ideal target. Jing leaned on the walbush stems, which were frozen stiff enough to steady him. It took a while to find the proper position for the lenses, and then it took longer still for his sight to adjust to the low light-

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level—particularly since there were curious faint-colored haloes everywhere except at the dead center of the field. Eventually, however, he worked out all the variables, so that he had a clear view. At last he said:

"Whether it's a world like ours, I cannot say. But I do see two stars where I never saw any before."

"Incredible!" breathed Twig, and Jing let go pressure from his limbs with a painful gasp and passed the lenses on. In a while:

"Oh! Oh, *yes!* But very indistinct! Rainbow, what do you see?"

She disposed herself carefully, leaning all her weight on her crippled side. Having gazed longer than either of them, she said, "Two stars beside the planet. Sharp and clear."

Turning, she sought Stolidchurl, and did the same, and exclaimed. "Not two more stars, but three! At least I think three . . . I—Shine, you look. Your sight is very keen, I know."

His mandibles practically chattering with excitement, the young sacerdote took his turn. "Three!" he reported. "And—and I see a disc! I always thought the planets were just points, like the stars! But I still see *them* as points! And what do you make of the colored blurs these lenses show?"

"Could it be that we're seeing a very faint aurora?" Rainbow ventured. "Jing, what do you think?"

Jing ignored her, his mind racing. If one put such lenses in a viewing funnel—no, not a funnel, better a tube—of pliobark, or whatever was to be had here in the north, and made provision for adjustment to suit different observers . . .

He said soberly, "Twig, this is a very great invention."

"I know, I know!" Twig clapped his claws in delight. "When I turn it on the sun, come spring—"

"You'll burn out what's left of your sight," Rainbow interjected flatly. "Making the sun as much brighter as the stars now appear will blind you. But there must be a way. Apply your genius to the problem while the rest of us get on with finding unknown stars. Perhaps they hold the key to what's amiss with cripples like me."

VI

For the rest of the winter all four of them were embarked on a fabulous voyage of discovery. The world receded until they could wander through it unheeding, like a thin mist; all that mattered was their study of the sky. Shine abandoned his duties altogether,

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and his superiors threatened to kill him, but he put himself under Rainbow's protection, and with Sturdy and her other prongsmen ready to spring to his aid, they dared not touch him.

Growing frightened because his ruptures would not heal, the Count occasionally sent for them to demand how their work was progressing, but during their eager attempts at explanation his mind tended to stray, and he invariably wound up by raging at them because they cared more for star-lore than for medicine. Nobody else in the castle—not even Twig's aides, who refused to venture forth when the wind was bitter enough to build frost-rime on one's mandibles—seemed to care that a revelation was in the making. Twig said it was because the cold weather had sent their minds into hibernation, like the dirq and fosq, which were so abundant in the summer and vanished into burrows in the fall.

There was one exception: the peasant Keepfire.

Throughout his life he had scarcely seen the stars. It was a tradition in his family that at winter sunset they should retreat to their cavern until spring reawoke the land. Twig, however, was sure it could not always have been so, and because he was so excited by what the lenses were revealing, he patiently taught Keepfire how to store warm air under his mantle and persuaded him to the observatory at a time when the air was so clear the brilliance of the heavens was almost hurtful.

Such was Keepfire's amazement on learning that the glass he had melted from sand could show sparks of light where to the naked eye was only blackness, he returned home full of enthusiasm to improve on what he had already done. It being impossible to find fuel for new and hotter fires at this season—and hard enough at any time—he set about collecting every scrap of glass he could, whether natural or resulting from their experiments. For hours on end he sat comparing them, wondering how each differed from the rest. At last, in what the jubilant Twig termed a fit of genius, he thought of a way to shape the ones that were nearly good until they outdid those that were excellent.

Using the skin of a fish that was sown with tiny rough crystalline points—hunted by people but scarcely preyed on in the wild because swallowing it tail-first as it fled was apt to rasp the predator's gullet—he contrived to grind a poor lens into a good one, at least so far as form was concerned. But then it was seamed with fine scratches. How to eliminate them? There was no means other than rubbing on something softer than the glass, until the glass itself

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shed enough spicules to complete the task. This he set himself to do.

Nightless days leaked away, and Jing and his companions almost forgot about Keepfire, because every time they went to the observatory, some new miracle presented itself.

At first Jing had thought it enough that, in the vicinity of the bright outer planets, there should suddenly appear new starlets, which—as time passed—clearly proved to be satellites of what Shine had been the first to recognize as actual discs. But then they looked at the Bridge of Heaven, otherwise known as the Sling, and except at its center it was no longer a band of uniform light; it was patently a dense mass of individual stars.

And there were so *many* stars! Even when the lenses were directed toward the dark square surrounding the New Star, at least a quarter-score (Shine claimed eight) other points of light appeared. At the zenith, near the horizon, it made no odds: wherever they looked, what had always been lightless zones, turned out to be dotted with tiny glowing specks.

The New Star itself resolutely refused to give up any secrets. Even Shine's keen vision, which far surpassed the others', failed to reveal more than a bright spot with a pale blur around it, a cloud lighted as a fire might light its smoke from underneath. Was it a fragment of the Maker's Robe, the aurora, which at unpredictable intervals draped the sky in rich and somber colors? In Jing's view that was unlikely. Before coming to Castle Thorn he had only heard of aurorae; now, having witnessed several, he was satisfied that they must partake more of the nature of clouds than of stars, for they did not necessarily move in the same sense as the rest of the sky. Were they then looking down on starfire from above? The image came naturally to folk whose ancestors had been treetop-dwelling predators, but by the same token "up" and "down" meant one thing to them: toward or away from the ground underpad.

Jing and Rainbow debated long about the matter as soon as they realized that the little stars shuttling back and forth beside the planets must in fact be revolving around them, moon-fashion. By that stage Jing's prized star-charts were little more than memoranda; he already knew there was a lifetime of work in filling the gaps the unaided eye had left. The perspectives opened up to him were terrifying. Because if there were any number of different up-and-downs, then not only must the planets be worlds like *the* world, with their own—plural!—moons, but the sun, whose planets circled

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it like moons, might be circling something greater yet, and . . . and . . . It was dizzying to contemplate!

At least the moon lent them clues. Observations at the full showed that the sparkles visible on the dark part of its disc were only a fraction of what was actually going on. Flash after brilliant flash came and went seemingly at random, lacking even the momentary trace that followed a meteor. And here again Keepfire proved to possess unexpected insight. Shown the moon through his original lenses, he said at once, "It's like when I make fire!"

And it was. By this time they had all watched his trick of striking rocks together and catching a spark on a tuft of shredded calamar.

Striking . . .

Jing felt he was being not so much struck as battered. It had been hard enough to accept the distances he had been taught about in childhood, necessary to let Sunbride race around the sun, the world stride around it, and the outer planets follow at their own respective speeds. What to make of a cosmos in which scores-of-scores-of-scores-of-scores (but it was pointless to try to count the stars in the Sling) of not just suns but their accompanying planets must be allowed for? If the sacerdotes were right in claiming that their sacred stones had fallen from heaven, and they were so tiny, could those brilliant lights above also be minute? Shine suggested as much, for he desperately wanted not to forsake all his former beliefs; in particular he clung to the notion that the New Star must indicate some great event in the world below. During a late snowstorm, however, Jing set him to making calculations based on the new observations —couched in the Ntahish symbols, which were wieldier than these obtained in the north—and the results overwhelmed the poor ex-sacerdote, even though he had been properly fed for months past and learned to separate dream from fantasy as never before in his young life. They demonstrated beyond doubt that in order to leave room for planetary motions the lights in the sky must be not only far off but also enormous. Did not a lantern fade to imperceptibility, no matter how skillfully you bred your gleamers, almost before its bearer was out of hearing? And when one added in an extra fact, which Shine himself had drawn to their attention—that Swiftyouth sometimes appeared out of round, as though attempting phases like the moon's—there was precisely *one* explanation that fitted the evidence. The universe must be full of suns and, therefore, presumably of planets too faint and far away for even their precious lenses to reveal.

A cosmic hierarchy of fire evolved in Jing's imagination: from the

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Sling compound of giant stars down to the briefest spark made by clashing rocks. Something pervaded all of them, something luminous, hurtful, transient, imponderable, yet capable of being fixed and leaving traces. Perhaps it penetrated everything! Was it the same force that made treetrunks strong enough to lift gigantic boulders, which brought forth blossoms, fruit, and nuts? It might be, surely, for fire shone brightly and so did glowplants and glitterweed, although they were cold to the touch and in color much like Stumpalong or Sluggard. So was there a connection? Suppose it were a matter of speed; suppose the slowness of plant-growth, and of the outer planets, meant *cool*, and the rapidity of flame meant *hot*. What did that imply about the stars? Remaining visibly the same for countless scores of years, must they not also be cool? Yet did not some of them now and then flare up? What about the bright streaks that nightly laced the firmament? Must they not be cool, because manifestly the air was warm only when the sun had long shone on it? Yet Shine declared that those who had come on one of the Maker's slingstones immediately after it landed invariably stated that it was too hot to touch, and indeed the surrounding area was often charred! What fantastic link was there between light and heat?

Vainly Jing sought to convey his thinking to his companions. He was as fluent now in spoken Forbish as Rainbow was in the use of Ntahish numbers. She, though, had not yet escaped her original obsession; she had only come around to the view that it was pointless to try to read from the heavens the true reason for her deformity, because if there were so many invisible stars, there might be one for everybody, and you could waste a lifetime seeking out your own. Before leaving home, or even as recently as the first time he looked at the sky through lenses, Jing might have considered such an argument valid; since getting over Drakh's death, however, he had experienced preternatural clarity of thought, and ideas that for half his life he had treated as rational had been consigned to memory, reclassified as imaginary or as dreamstuff. Perhaps this was due to the plain but nourishing diet he was eating; perhaps it had something to do with the monotonous environment of the long night, when he was free from the cyclical shock of sunrise and sunset. It didn't matter. What counted was that he could now clearly envision other worlds. What a plethora of individuals might not inhabit all those planets, seen and unseen! What marvels might lie yonder in the dark, more astonishing to him than Ntah to those who knew only Castle Thorn!

And what daunting celestial oceans of knowledge remained to be

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traversed, when by happenstance a humble peasant could open people's eyes to the miracles inherent in plain sand!

"We'll learn more of the answers," Twig kept saying in what he intended as a tone of comfort, "when the sun rises again. Darkness makes one's mind sluggish."

Yet Jing's was not, nor was Shine's. Could this be due to their constant intake of starfire? Could the mind as well be driven by the mysterious force? Was that why Keepfire, shut away in his foul-smelling cavern, believing in nothing and nobody save his traditional lore, was able to choose and pursue a course of action when Jing's mind was foggy with whirling symbols? Hedge and Bush became angrier and angrier with him, and they subsided into sulky grumbling, so that no more new results emerged from the laboratory. Yet Keepfire worried on, and polished and pondered and talked to himself and polished some more, and . . .

And on that spring day when the sun's disc cleared the horizon entirely for the first time since fall, Keepfire came in triumph to Twig and Jing and Rainbow, unfolding a scrap of the softest icefawhide, he revealed a pair of lenses of such impeccable shape that all the results of nature, or of early pourings, faded into insignificance.

Proudly he said, "Do I not bring the gift you wanted most? So I'll ask for what I want. You have shown me stars. They are little fires like the ones I understand. Now I want to see the biggest fire. Show me the sun!"

"But—" Rainbow began, and clipped off the words. Mutely she appealed to her companions, who could envision as well as she the effect of looking at the sun through nearly perfect lenses.

Twig was oblivious to her concern. He breathed, "To see the sun once with these would be enough to sacrifice my sight for!"

"Oh, shut up!" Jing roared. They shrank back as he erupted to his full height, every muscle and tubule in his body at maximum tension. "You're talking like a senile fool, and I speak to you as a sworn friend! Don't you think your eyesight will be useful tomorrow, too? What we need is a way to look at the sun without going blind!" He rounded on Keepfire. "Would you give up all vision for one fleeting glimpse of the sun? You'd rather see it over and over, wouldn't you?"

Alarmed, Keepfire signalled vigorous agreement.

"Very well, then!" Jing relaxed into a more courteous posture but remained tenser than his usual stance among friends. "What do we know of which makes a scene darker without blurring detail? In Ntah old folk sometimes protected their sight on a sunny day"—he

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used the past tense unconsciously, and later he thought of it as a premonition—"by using thin grey shells. But those deformed the image. Well?"

There was a long pause. At last Rainbow said, "You find membranes inside furnimals that are no good for parchment because you can see through to the other side."

Shine clacked his claws. "Yes! And stretching them can make them thinner still. Yet they diminish light!"

"They make everything yellower!" Twig objected, and at once caught himself. "Ah, but the thinner, the clearer! So if we put several one behind another, and take away each in turn until the eye hurts . . . Jing, I'm pleased to be your friend! Once again you see to the core of the matter when I spring to premature conclusions."

"If you want to honor someone, honor Keepfire," Jing said, and reached a decision not foreshadowed by intention. Taking the new beautiful lenses one in either claw, he shrank from his overweening posture to the lowest he could contrive without pain, and remained there while he uttered unpremeditated words.

"You know, and I know, without putting it to the test, that these will reveal to us yet more amazing private knowledge. It should not be private; it would not be private, had anybody else within this castle shared our interest. But it *is* so, and must not *remain* so. Already we have learned so much, I want to share our findings with Ntah. The dullwits of Forb and every other city I traversed to come here ought to have their eyes opened—no? Even if, like your fellow sacerdotes, Shine, they decline to take advantage, do they not deserve to have this knowledge pointed out to them?"

Shine shouted, "Yes—*yes!*"

Thus encouraged, Jing yielded to a half-guilty, half-ecstatic temptation and let his mind be taken over by the dream-level. Imagination was not enough; it was handicapped by such rational considerations as distance, delay, expenditure of effort, the obstinacy of other people. But already their new discoveries had made it plain that everyday knowledge was inadequate to analyze the outcome. For once his dream faculty might be wiser than his sober and reflective consciousness.

Suddenly his head was roaring-loud with revelations, as though he had tapped the sap-run of time. He marvelled at what he heard himself say—or rather declaim.

"Oh-hya-na-ut thra-t-ywat insk-y-trt ah-bng-llytr-heethwa ibyong hr-ph-tnwef-r heesh-llytr-kwu-qtr-annibyong—ah, but I tackle poorly

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this speech of foreigners and wish I could say what is needful in the speech of the folk I grew up among! But I am far away and lonely beyond bearing, so now my community is these who welcome me as friends. I speak to them and to the world because I overflow with knowledge born of fire! I have been set alight like dry crops on a distant hill, and the scent of smoke from what I know must carry on the wind and warn the world of what's in store when heaven's fire descends to burn the densest wettest jungle and boil the Lake of Ntah! Vast fires surpassing number or belief loom yonder in the dark, and we are cast away upon a fragile barq, this little world. More and more fires loom, and every night the dark is pierced with streaks of fire; and what it is we do not know, but we must master it or it will utterly consume us! We must pledge ourselves to spare the world the doom of ignorance, not keeping any knowledge private that we've found, but spreading it about to last beyond our lifetimes! You three and I must make a vow together, and in token of it take half another's name. The half is *fire!* It leaves a crust of dirty ash, but in another season it may turn to life anew and so our world must do although the fire of heaven strike us down! Take the vow, I beg you, I beseech you, and let not our secret knowledge vanish from the minds of those who on this lost and drifting orb hope to make something greater than themselves!"

He was almost screaming with the fury of his visions, for the countless stars were crashing together in a colossal mass of flame, and the world itself was ripe to be their fuel.

Fuel—?

Abruptly he was back to normal consciousness, and he wanted to say something quiet and ordinary, though perfused with unexpected insight, but he could not, for Shine was clutching his claw and crying at the top of his voice.

"I know now what the New Star signified! One is come among us who has wisdom we have never guessed! I'll take the extra name and vow my service!"

"I too!" Old Twig was lowering himself, though his agony was plain. "You have united fire above and fire below, and we must tell the world your teaching!"

Last, Rainbow, awkwardly, with her lopsided gait, drew close and said, "I vow the same. For what it's worth I'll bind my followers as well."

There was a pause. She looked at him uncertainly and said at long last, "Jing . . . ?"

The tempest of impressions was fading from his mind. He rose,

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a little shyly, as though embarrassed. She said again, "Jing!" And continued: "What did you see? What did you see?"

But it was useless to try to describe everything that had so briefly stormed into awareness. He said eventually, "If stars are fire, then new stars happen when fresh fuel is fed to them. What fuel is there, barring worlds like ours? If we would rather not be fuel for a star, there's no one who can save us but ourselves . . . I've dreamed. It's made me weary. I must rest."

VII

That evening Rainbow sent for Keepfire to share food publicly with them and cement their compact, which the peasant did nervously yet with obvious glee. This act made Shine a formal enemy of the other sacerdotes; it was scarcely necessary, however, since he had long disdained the asceticism they relied on to make their dreams vivid. Afterward Jing found his companions treating him with positive awe, hanging on his every word, as though he were indeed the ultimately righteous person harbingered by the New Star. He did his best to dissuade them, but the force of his vision had profoundly impressed them, and it was useless. He resigned himself to their adulation.

Further revelations from the sky were delayed. Warm spring air from the south, drawn in by the constant thermals rising above the valley, met the still-frozen ground beyond the mountains, and fog and cloud veiled the sun. The ice that had temporarily blocked the access channel began to fracture with noises like a gigant snapping trees, and Jing was moderately content to occupy himself by preparing a detailed report of their discoveries for the doctor in Forb, which he planned to send south by the first barq of spring. The barq arrived, and like the one that had brought him and Drakh, it carried a sick passenger.

Leaving Rainbow to polish his final draft, Jing went to the wharf to see the boat come in. He was unprepared to hear a voice hail him in Ntahish.

"It is the Honorable Jing? Here am I, Ah-ni Qat!"

Supported by two youthful aides, a boy and a girl, a stooped yet familiar figure limped ashore. Jing said disbelievingly, "The son of my dear friend the Vizier?"

For he remembered Qat as a springly youth, and this personage

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looked so old and moved so slowly . . . and his skin was patched with ugly scars.

"Indeed, indeed! All winter I've struggled across this snowbound continent because at Forb I heard rumors concerning your whereabouts. I'd not have had the endurance to continue but that my father gave me the duty of seeking you out and telling you: Ntah is no more!"

For an instant Jing stood frozen. Then he said uncertainly, "Young friend, you're sick. You're ruled by dreams."

"Would that I were," Qat whispered. "After your departure plague ran wild among us. Never were such horrors witnessed by a living eye! People died where they stood; their bodies fell into the lake and river until the water grew so foul the very fish were poisoned. Those who survived lost their reason and fled under the lash of horrid dreams. Most went south. I doubt they escaped like me and my companions. Our northern route must have saved us. It seems the plague loves heat."

"Your father—" Jing began.

"Died among the first. So did Lord Waw-Yint. There is no use in speaking of his heir. Ntah is a land of rotting carcasses, and all who used to live there have run away."

Qat's girl companion uttered a groan of misery. Jing said slowly, "We must find you quarters. The Count has treated me kindly, as has his daughter. You will be made welcome."

Surrounded by the high-piled parchments on which he was recording their discoveries, Jing sat blindly staring at the overcast sky. His mind was fuller of despair than ever in his life before; he wanted to renounce consciousness and retreat to dreams, where Ntah would last for all eternity and its glory never fade.

Behind him creepers rustled. A soft, familiar voice said, "Is it true about your homeland?"

He did not turn. "Yes, Lady Rainbow. If Qat says so, he speaks the truth. I no longer have a home."

"You have made one here," she said. "By your kindness to me from the beginning, when first you told me I was not, after all, accursed; when you said you were surprised I had not found mates in spite of my misshapenness; when you opened my sight to a heaven full of so many stars it's absurd for any one of us petty beings to count on reading his or her fate up yonder—Oh, Jing!" Spreading her mantle, she embraced him as he made to rise. "You have caused

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me to love you, poor twisted creature that I am! Let me prove that you have a home wherever I am and for as long as I may live!"

She hesitated, and added in an altered tone, "That is, if you do not find me totally repulsive."

There was a moment of absolute stillness. Jing looked at her and saw through her outward form, to the bright keen mind within. And his oath of celibacy was to lost Ntah. . . .

They were both very clumsy, but they found it funny, and afterward he was able to say, in full possession of his rational faculties, "But your father? He cares nothing for our work, and may despise me."

"He is sad and sick and this winter has shown him he too can grow old. He has spoken much about overclose breeding, as one sees with canifangs, and has even mentioned the idea of a grandchild. Inwardly I think I may be normal, and most certainly you and I cannot be cousins to any degree. We shall find out. If not—so be it."

She refolded her mantle about her. Checking suddenly, she said, "Jing, if tomorrow you decide you never want to see me again—if you feel it was only misery that made you desire me—I shan't care, you know. You've given me such a gift as I never hoped for."

"And you," he said fondly, "have given me such courage as an hour ago I thought I'd never enjoy again."

"So you want my ill-starred daughter?" grunted the Count, when, with difficulty, his attendants had roused him from the mist of dreams in which he now passed most of his time. His ruptured tubules had been unable to heal, owing to his corpulence, and he slumped in his sitting-pit like a half-filled water-bladder. "Well, I always thought you were crazy, and now you're proving it. Or have you scried something in the stars to show she's fitter than she looks? Wish you'd do the same for me!"

"I want her," Jing said firmly, "because she possesses a sharp mind, a keen wit, and an affectionate nature."

"More than I could say of most of the women I've taken," the Count said, sighing. "Had I been gifted with a son . . . You want a grand celebration? You want mating-presents?" Suddenly he was suspicious.

"Nothing but your authority, father, to continue our work together as mates as well as friends," said Rainbow.

"Hah! Work, you call it! Wonderful benefits it's brought us, all your gabble about stars the naked eye can't see. And the same goes for your people, Jing! Wiped out by plague, so they tell me! Still,

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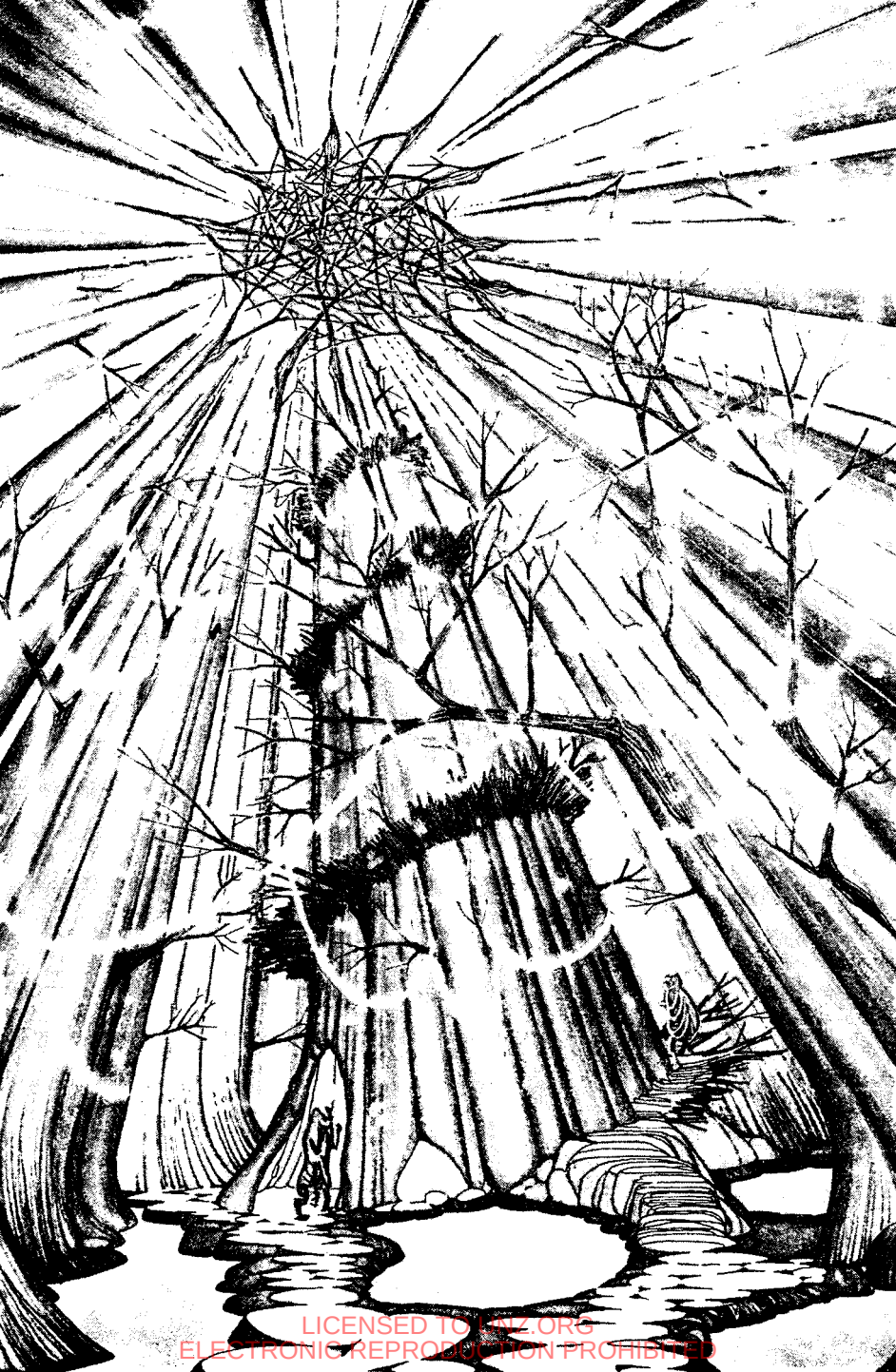

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you're of good stock, and maybe crossbreeds are what's been lacking in our line. I'd rather believe too many cousins mated with cousins to keep control of the best homes and richest land than that I was cursed by the Maker!"

"You are perfectly correct, sir. We too, after all, are animals."

"Hah! What animal could find more stars in the sky than the sacerdotes say were put there at the Beginning? Oh, take her, and bring me a grandchild if you can. For myself, I'm beyond hope. And—" He hesitated.

"Yes, father?" Rainbow prompted, taking his claw in hers.

"Dream of me as long as you can after I'm dead. Try not to let the dreams be ugly ones."

"Look, Jing!" Rainbow exclaimed as they left the Count's presence. "The skies are clearing! In a little we shall see the sun!"

But there were other matters to attend to. Qat was weak, and his servants were in scarcely better shape. All of them bore plague-scars. Apparently the illness began with sacs of fluid under the skin, accompanied by fever and delirium. If they burst outward, the patient might survive, at the cost of being marked for life. If they burst inward, the victim died. Applying cleanlickers was useless; none could digest the foul matter exuded by the sores. Neither Jing nor Twig had heard of any disease remotely similar. "Maybe this was what the New Star heralded!" said Qat in an excess of bitterness.

"Were that so," Jing responded stonily, "would not I, the most dedicated seeker of its meaning, have been the first to be struck down?"

He thought how pleased the sacerdotes would be to hear of such a notion.

By then it was midday, and the sun shone clear, albeit not very bright, being at this season close to the horizon. Rainbow was eager to get to the observatory, and Jing—reluctant though he was to abandon these three who might well be his last surviving compatriots—was on the point of consenting to accompany her when Keepfire came hurrying with news that settled the matter.

"Sir, Scholar Twig is at the observatory with Shine, and they have shown me yet more marvels! Come at once!"

All else forgotten, they rushed in his wake.

"I was right!" Twig crowed. "I did see dark patches on the sun! Now Shine has seen them too!"

"It's true," Shine said. He had stretched layers of furnimal mem-

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brane across two branches of walbush so that one might look at the sun through them. Even so, long staring with the tubed lenses had made his eye visibly sore. "And something more, as well!"

"What?" Jing seized the tube.

"Look to right and left of the sun's disc, and you'll notice little sparks! They're very faint, but I definitely saw them. Perhaps they're distant stars, far beyond the sun, which just happen to lie in that direction, but your charts show that some of the brightest stars in that area of sky must lie near the sun right now, and I can't see any of *them!*"

Jing did not need to consult his maps to know which stars were meant. Bracing himself on a stout branch, he aligned the tube. At first his sight, after the low light-levels of winter, would not adjust, and he saw only a blur.

"Too bright? I can add another membrane," Shine proposed.

"No, I'm getting a clearer view now . . ." Jing's ocular muscles were adapting with painful speed. "And—oh, that's incredible!"

What he saw was not a blank white disc. There were three dark spots on it. How could that be?

"Do you see the bright sparks?" Shine demanded.

But his vision was overloaded. He stood back, relinquishing the tube, and for a long while he was unable to make out his immediate surroundings.

"I was right, wasn't I?" Twig exclaimed.

"Yes," Jing said soberly. "Yes, friend, you were right."

This too must be added to his report on their discoveries. And, given the delay caused by his grief, it could not possibly be ready for the barq presently in harbor here. At all costs, however, it must be sent by the next one. He said so, and Twig objected, "But if we have to take time to write up our findings—"

Jing cut him short. "Did we not pledge to share what we learn with as many other folk as possible?"

"So we did," Twig admitted humbly.

"Well, then! Let's have a score, a score-of-scores, of keen young eyes like Shine's at work on this! I want a full account of our fantastic news in circulation during the coming summer. Even without the resources of Ntah, there must surely still be people on this continent who will respond and imitate what we are doing. Some of them, with luck, may do it *better!*"

Shine had reclaimed the lenses and was staring through them again. Now he gave a gasp.

"I see half of Sunbride!"

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"What?" The others turned to him uncertainly.

"Half!" he repeated obstinately. "Tiny, but perfectly clear—half a disc, like half the moon, and as far from the sun as she ever wanders! Our conclusions must be true! They *must!*"

VIII

Parchments in one claw, pearlseed in the other, the steersman of the barq about to depart said, "So you want this delivered to your doctor friend in Forb, do you?"

Something about his tone made Jing react with alarm. He said, "The price is fair, surely! If you doubt the quality of the seed, come and see what a jeweltree the Count sprouted from one I gave him last fall. Even during the winter—"

"So you can still grow jeweltrees, can you? When your trencher-plants rot in the ground!"

It was true; with the return of warm weather, the blight that had affected last year's crop was spreading again, and trencher-plant was their staple diet.

"What does that have to do with—?" Jing began. The steersman cut him short.

"Your doctor had better be cleverer than most! We aren't going as far as Forb this trip. The Maker knows whether anyone will want to go there ever again!"

"What are you saying, man?" Jing advanced, clenching his claws.

"The plain truth! Some filthy plague spawned of the far south is rife in Forb, and a murrain is abroad among the livestock, and the very bravetrees are wilting! We've been here three days—how is it this is the first you've heard?"

"I've . . . uh . . . I've been preoccupied," Jing muttered.

"Dream-lost, more like it!" The steersman returned the parchments with a contemptuous gesture and—more reluctantly—the pearlseed too, adding, "You'll need this to pay for medicine if you yourself plan to return to Forb, which I don't counsel!"

He turned away, shouting orders for his crew to pry loose the barq's tentacles and head down-channel.

"Sure we came by way of Forb," Qat husked. "I told you so. But we aren't sick any more, none of us. Maybe I'm still softer than I should be, but that's a matter of time."

"Yes—yes, of course," Jing muttered comfortingly. He nonetheless

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cast a worried glance at all three of them: Qat, still limp enough to hobble rather than walk, and the boy and girl, with their disfiguring scars. Not, according to rumor, that that had prevented their being taken up as curiosities by the younger members of the staff. When even the Count presently approved of out-crossing, and had let his own daughter choose a foreigner for her mate, it was the fashionable thing. Besides, the sacerdotes maintained that no plague could touch those who defied it boldly, so . . .

Their influence was rising again since news of Ntah's downfall. Was this not, they declared, perfect proof of the Maker's vengeance against those who defied His will? In any normal year, such a claim would have been laughed out of conscience; now, though, the blight on the trencher-plants meant that many families were facing a hungry summer, and famine went claw-in-claw with madness, even when no plague exacerbated the victims' predicament.

Jing had witnessed, on his way hither from Ntah, how precarious was sanity among his folk—how a single year's crop-failure might entrain surrender to the tempting world of dreams. When he paid full attention to his imagination, he was chilled by the all-too-convincing prospects conjured up. The Count's illness was withdrawing one psychological prop from the minds of the people of the valley; it was certain that when he died, some of his old rivals from Forb, or their descendants, would come to squabble over his legacy—that was, naturally, if they weren't caught by the plague already. Hunger and sickness might withdraw the others, and then . . .

Jing trembled at the threat the future held.

Yet his companions refused to worry, even about a means of getting their knowledge spread abroad. If this barq's crew refused to return to Forb, they said, another steersman could be found more susceptible to a handsome payment, more prepared to run risks. It was with some reluctance that they agreed to make extra copies of the parchments Jing had already drafted; Keepfire, of course, could not write, and Twig was constantly on call to administer medicine to the Count. Shine and Rainbow did their best, however, and by the time the next barq arrived, there were six copies of the report at least in summary outline—enough, with luck, for learned folk elsewhere to repeat their studies.

But they, and Jing too, would far rather have continued investigating the dark spots on the sun, and the bright nearby sparks, which so far Shine alone had actually seen. Only their sworn pledge, Jing sometimes thought, made them obey his orders. How quickly they were defecting from their brief period of professed admiration!

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Could it be because—?

He roused one morning from reverie with a firm and fixed dream-image in his mind, and it was shocking in its import. At once he rushed in search of Twig, and found him coming away from the Count's chamber with a grave expression.

Without waiting for an exchange of greetings, he said in a rush, "Twig, I believe the plague is at work among us!"

Twig gazed soberly at him. He said at length, "How did you know? I thought you said the disease was new to you and you were unacquainted with its preliminary symptoms."

Jing tensed in horror. He said, "But I guessed it from a dream!"

"Then your dreams are clearer than some people's reality. Did you know the Count attempted to mate with the girl your friend brought here?"

"I'm not surprised, but—no, I didn't know!"

"It was futile, of course, but . . . Well, today he exhibits all the signs Qat said we should watch out for. I'm on my way to check out the other partners she and her brother have engaged with. Have you—? No, forgive me. I'm sure neither you nor Rainbow would consider the idea. But I must ask you a physician's question. Is the Lady Rainbow successfully in bud?"

Jing nodded. "We realized it yesterday. Last night we went to the observatory, but there was a bright aurora, so we talked about the future. We're both afraid."

"Internally she's as sound as any woman," Twig assured him. "All the normal pressures are there; only her stance is distorted. But given that the Count, already weakened . . . You foresee what I do?"

"Even more. Even worse."

"Very likely." Twig hesitated. "Tell me: how did you decide the plague had got a grip here?"

"Because you in particular—forgive my bluntness—seemed to forget your enthusiasm for my leadership so quickly. A pledge is given with full rationality; dreams erode the recollection of it. I don't speak now of your duty to the Count, of course, but it was never my intention to prevent you serving him. It's a matter of priorities."

"You're right," Twig said after reflection. "In my present mood of calm, I see what you mean. Service to the whole world, which can be performed by spreading our knowledge, is more important than service to an old man whose life I can't prolong with all my skills. We must get those reports away at once, in all possible directions. I'd have realized this truth myself except that—yes, you guessed correctly: I'm being pestered by hideously persuasive dreams such

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as I haven't known since long before I came to Castle Thorn. And fever due to the onset of the plague would best explain that."

"I think I must believe the same," Jing muttered.

"Oh, no! You of all people! No, you must survive! It would be unbearable to think that the greatest discoverer of our age must be struck down randomly! Far better you should escape to tell the world your tale!"

"But I've kept company with Qat," Jing said stonily. "Out of nostalgia, I've spend half-days at a time talking with him and neglecting my own greater duty. Miraculously, I believe Rainbow still to be unaffected. She and the child she buds must go away and take our reports. Might I beg you to attend her before you continue with other matters?"

"Yes, certainly! But I must warn you that nothing I say or do can alter an established fact. She may already—"

"I know there's a risk. I want to diminish it. We'll give the steersman of the next barq all my pearlseeds so he can make for the great ocean and find one of the monster barqs that legend says can ply across it to another continent."

"Legend? You want to trust in legends now? Surely you must, after all, be afflicted!"

"I speak out of imagination rather than dream—though the two sometimes become so intermingled . . . Yes, I think there's no alternative. In one of the visions that haunted me this morning, I saw the bravetrees of Forb rotting from the base wherever a corpse had been deposited. What manner of sickness can attack trees as well as people?"

"A new kind," Twig said slowly.

"As new as the New Star?"

"Ah, but it was only a dream-guess!"

"I think we'll see the same when the first victims die at Castle Thorn."

Clenching his claws, Jing added as he turned away, "I wish with all my might it may just be a dream. But I fear it may well be correct imagining. The blight upon our trencher-plants, at any rate, is real enough."

IX

When next they heaved the Count out of his sitting-pit to cleanse and salve him, there were the betraying sacs beneath his skin. And

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they were readily recognized, for a girl at one of the outlying villages who had partnered the boy from Ntah had died from their inward rupturing that very day.

Instantly the sacerdotes announced that this was the doom pronounced by the Maker against anyone who harbored heretics from foreign lands, and in the grip of the fever that preceded the visible outbreak of sores, the peasants forgot what those same sacerdotes had been saying only days earlier about confronting the risk of plague with boldness. Keepfire managed to prevent his family and followers from being deluded; from one of the confusing visions that now beset him, part sane imagination and part lunatic dream, Jing almost extracted a clue concerning life below the massive layers of rock that sheltered Twig's laboratory, but it evaded him at last because he cared more about the survival of his wife and child.

For a little it seemed that Hedge and Bush were certain to escape, which would have dealt a logical blow to the sacerdotes' argument, especially since Twig's sole ulcer had burst outward and his cleanlickers proved able to deal with it. They had all been particularly close to Jing, and it was being claimed that associating with the Ntahans was the key to guilt and the Maker's punishment. But the day came when Bush succumbed and admitted contact with the Ntahish girl, and a frenzy of hate exploded like one of the geysers that snowbelong hunters reported far to the north.

"On the way to the observatory they set their canifangs at me," Rainbow said. "Only Sturdy's quickness with his prong prevented me from being badly hurt."

They sat in her chambers, high in the castle and well-defended, at a time when normally the night would be quiet but for distant icefaw screams and maybe a little music.

They all cast uncertain glances toward Sturdy. Were a trained prongsman to become delirious before he was restrained, there could be considerable slaughter, especially when reflex due to killing had already been established in his mind. And killing canifangs was normally no part of an escort's duty.

Still, there were no marks to be seen on him.

"It's essential now for you to get away," Twig said to Rainbow. Her budding was barely perceptible because of her lopsidedness. But her attendants could not be trusted to keep such a secret. Let the sacerdotes once get news of it, and they would no longer be confronting angry peasants but rather a systematic series of clever attempts to frustrate the birth.

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Jing drew a deep breath. "You don't yet know how essential," he said, and spread the right side of his mantle in a manner he would never normally do in anybody's presence except hers . . . but these were intimate friends.

"You too!" Twig blurted as he recognized what Jing was now revealing.

"It would appear," Jing said with all the detachment he could command, "that even those who make a good recovery, such as Qat and his companions, still carry the plague with them."

"I'll kill him! I'll *kill* Qat!" Shine screamed, erupting to his full height. "He's going to deprive us of—"

"You will do no such thing," Jing interrupted. It was strange, he reflected, how cold he felt, when he knew abstractly that he must by now be in the grip of fever. Just so long as he could continue to separate dream from reality . . . "You will hew to your oath. You will undertake the protection of Lady Rainbow and my child and all the parchments on which we have copied details of what we have discovered. You will escort her away from Castle Thorn before the peasants storm it, which will doubtless be the day after they notice its bravetrees rotting where corpses have been consigned to feed the roots." This, with a meaningful glance at Twig. "I have no homeland. I have no future. I have used my life as it befitted me to do. You have sometimes appeared to look on me as a substitute for the imaginary Maker who so long ruled your life. I'm not a god. If there is one, He watches us but does not interfere. He speaks to us, perhaps, but if His voice is couched in the language of the stars, it's up to us, not Him, to spell out the message. . . . Oh, I ramble!"

"Not at all!" cried Shine. "You tell me what I most need to be told!"

"Believe it when I'm gone, and you'll do well," Jing said. Already he could feel the sac he had exposed starting to throb. "Now, take the future in trust. You, Shine; you, Scholar Twig; you, Keepfire, who made us the tools to reveal unknown truth; you, my lady, who bear something of me which would otherwise be as hopelessly lost as Ntah itself—*all* of you must listen to my words and cherish what I say as proudly and as fiercely as when we took our oath. And by the way, Shine!"

Humbly the ex-sacerdote looked a question.

"Don't ever speak again of killing. Qat will die young; he was weakened anyhow by his suffering. Or if not, some crazy fool with a mind full of lunatic dreams will dispose of him. But this is neither justice nor vengeance. No, we must speak always and forever of life

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instead of death; we must fight the foolishness of dreams and concentrate on sanity. We must feed and shelter and educate our people, until the day dawns when we know how to conquer sickness and famine, blight and murrain. Then, and only then, shall we be fit to understand the message of the sky. Then, and only then, will the tools Keepfire created for us fall into the proper claws. And yours too, Twig, and mine—the star-charts created by my people . . . my *former* people."

He was briefly silent, and the pause was full of sorrow.

"But let nothing that has been well done go to waste!" he resumed at length. "Not that it can, if it's recorded in the stars. But we don't speak that language yet, and maybe it will be a long time before we do. Knowing now how many more stars there are than we believed, we must never be arrogant again! In all humility, going as it were in a mental crouch, we must patiently await the time when we are entitled to stand up to our full height, *and that height shall reach the stars to take them in our grasp like ripened fruit!* I say to you—"

At that moment he felt the sac under his mantle rupture.

Inward.

While they looked at him in wonder, for his peroration had been charged with the same power that persuaded them to join him in their common pledge, he said gently, "I am as good as dead, my friends. Tomorrow I shall surely be insane. I speak to you with the last vestige, the last shred, of what was Ayi-Huat Jing, court astrologer to His Most Puissant Majesty Lord Waw-Yint of Ntah, who set forth upon a journey longer than any of his nation previously, and must now die as my nation died. Dream of me. Make others dream of me. Or all my work will go for nought."

He added silently, "Would I had said that in my own speech. I could have expressed it so much better . . ."

X

The day after the Count's death, another of the regular barqs came to the castle wharf. Her steersman was horrified to learn that the plague was here ahead of him, and was in mind to put about at once and risk his boat starving under him on the return trip. But Twig handed him all the pearlseeds left in Jing's store—enough to buy the barq and its crew a score of times over—and he was reassured that at least this journey would not be as fruitless as he had feared. The peasants were in the grip of delirium; only the precarious loyalty

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of Sturdy and the other prongsmen kept them at bay while Rainbow and Shine, in obedience to Jing's order, scrambled on board with the precious parchments.

"But where shall we go?" the steersman cried. "Forb is rotting like a blighted fungus! I saw its bravetrees lean toward the river as though they had been snapped by a gigant!"

"Any place the water carries you away from plague!" Twig retorted. "Do they not say there are folk who ply the ocean aboard barqs that make yours look like half-grown pups?"

"We'd have to chance the rapids of the Sheerdrop Range!"

"Then chance them, on a route you never dared before! It's better than the certainty of plague!" Rounding on the prongsmen, Twig ordered them to prod loose the barq's tentacles despite its groans of hunger.

"Won't you come with us?" Rainbow shouted. "Even if—"

"Your father's dead. Your husband told me he would rather you did not watch him follow the same course." Twig descended to the wharf's edge and gently touched her claw. "No, Shine is to take care of you now. I've had my life, as Jing had his. If only we could read the stars more clearly, we might know why. But what you bear with you will instruct the future. You are the wife, my lady, of the greatest man it's been my privilege to know. Create a posterity for him. If the bud fails, then do so anyhow. I cannot; I'm old and weak and I must resign myself to facts."

"If by some miracle—"

"Qat has told us positively there are no miracles with this disease. Only if the sac ruptures to the outside like mine . . . and Jing's did not."

"Couldn't you have *made* it rupture?"

"That too was tried, in Ntah. It always failed."

The steersman was glancing nervously from one to other of them. He said, "If this woman has the plague-mark on her—"

"No, she does not!" Twig flared. "That's precisely why we want to get her out of here! You have pay enough for twenty voyages! Go as far as you can, go anywhere you can, and deliver our message to the world. Next time, perhaps, we may know enough about the universe to conquer such a plague! But without the information that you carry, someone else in the far future will have to start all over again! Oh, get under *way,* will you? The castle will be stormed within the day!"

The steersman flogged the barq's tentacles, and they unwillingly let go their grip; she put about and made down-channel. Watching,

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Keepfire—who had had the chance to travel with Rainbow but refused because he feared the water more than fire—said, "Do you think, sir, that our work has gone to waste?"

"I sometimes fear it, sometimes think it can't," was Twig's reply. "Sometimes I feel it's like the seed a fungus sows on the spring wind, so numerous that a few at least must find a lodging in good ground. Sometimes I can imagine it being like a trencher-plant, at risk from unknown kinds of blight predicted or maybe not predicted by the New Star. At all events I know one thing. We are to consign the remains of Master Jing to your hot pool, instead of to a pool with fishes in or the roots of a tree."

Startled, Keepfire said, "This is to do more honor to me and my family? Sir, it's already been enough!"

"Not honor," Twig sighed. "He said, when he still possessed some trace of rationality, that he'd been told how hot pools can break up a dead animal. Did Hedge or Bush mention this, or was it you?"

"I think I did!" said Keepfire with a trace of pride.

"He wants to die more completely than anyone before, dissolved if possible into his finest shreds. He wants to leave a legacy of health and information, not a rotting body to convey more plague. Come with me. He said he had chosen to die on the departure of his wife, and when we enter his chamber, we shall find a corpse for sure."

"But we shall dream of him," said Keepfire, following. "We shall make sure he is dreamed of for all time." ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 79)

THIRD SOLUTION TO THE VALLEY OF THE APES

Gorilla my dreams, I love you.
Honest I do. . . .

The first puzzle is based on a problem I found in a recent book, *The Universe Within*, by Morton Hunt. The second problem derives from a puzzle by Michael Steuben. Lulu, who is especially fond of awful puns, sent me the third.

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LETTERS

Dear Editor:

A few years ago, Abbie Hoffman wrote that he used to go along with his radical friends to a bar in the Village where they would plan the overthrow of the System. The occasion came when the owner of the bar decided he would like to change the decor of the place. Hoffman wrote that the Yippies treated the decision as a great personal insult and petitioned and protested and picketed what they called a fascist attempt to destroy the beauty of the bar. I think the owner finally sold the place. From this, Hoffman says he learned a great truth. No matter how radical the position, nobody ever wants *their* status-quo disturbed.

How does this affect *IA sfm?* Stick with your decision concerning the new logo. If you have to change, let the change be *your* decision based on what you feel would be right for the mag. I happen to like the cover; it does the job it was designed to do. It's clean, crisp, mature and it attracts attention to the magazine on a crowded newsstand. Of course, I feel a little backward concerning your opinions of the cover. You stated that the cover was chosen because most people refer to the magazine as "Asimov's." I, on the other hand, invariably say to my wife, "I'm going down to the newsstand and pick up the latest 'Isaac's,' dear."

Concerning the stories themselves, am I the only person who has noted the running themes you've been putting in recent issues? Almost every issue has a recurring theme. This month three of your stories dealt with different games! I almost expected to find another article on the adventures of Forth Sally. The stories (all three of them) were very good, by the way.

I haven't yet read a Majipoor story that I didn't like, and this issue didn't disappoint me. The poetry was all right. I can take or leave that sort of stuff usually, though once in a while you print a really great poem that justifies the other months of filler. And finally, I think Avram Davidson should put his Unhistory series into book form. I know I'd buy it.

Well, here's to next month.

Edward J. Rhodes
New York, NY

True! True! I am absolute monarch over my own two-room office and while furnishings in the rest of the apartment get adjusted now and then, nothing in my rooms must ever be touched. I have them

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where I want them!!!!

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I am an avid science fiction reader and have been for as long as I can remember. As such I would like to express to you my deepest thanks for collecting and publishing such tremendous works in each and every issue of your magazine.

While reading the Jan. 18, 1982, issue, specifically "Halfway," by Sharon Farber and Dorothy Smith, I was greatly disturbed to see that the co-authors had used kilograms as a unit of weight instead of the correct metric unit of newtons. This error, although relatively common, disturbed me more because the blurb at the beginning of the story stated that "Dorothy Smith" was an electrical engineer.

Although mass measurements are indeed used as weights in many cases, they are acceptable because there is a difference in mass. However, in the story there is no such change in mass but a change in gravity. It makes one wonder whether the United States can ever effectively use the metric system when not even those of us with scientific training (who are supposed to have knowledge of the metric system) can use metric measurements correctly.

Someone may take exception and say that engineers have not had such training, but I have yet to hear of an engineer who has not at least had an elementary physics course.

T. J. Hofmann
Cincinnati, OH

I have tried to solve the matter myself by never using units for weight and dealing with mass exclusively: cowardly evasion, I admit.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

First of all, I would like to thank you for your little magazine. It has become, for me, a balm to a wounded soul. After a day or a week of fighting for survival in an unsympathetic world, your magazine has the effect of renewing my passion for life.

If I sound rather morose in the above paragraph, it is because I have just read a story that I spent two weeks writing, and it put me to sleep. I was wondering if this has ever happened to Dr. Asimov. If so, did you try to salvage the story or file it under garbage and start a new one?

I also want to thank Dr. Asimov for creating in me a passion for science fiction. Several years ago, while I was rotting in a Marine Corps brig, a friend gave me a copy of *Foundation.* Two weeks later, after a ten-day hunger strike, my demand was met and I received the remainder of that great trilogy. Since that time I have read everything I could lay my hands on in the area of science fiction, especially if it sported the Good Doctor's byline.

Consequently, I was delighted to see Dr. Asimov's story in your Feb. 15, 1982, issue, and I look forward to seeing more in future issues. I read every issue of your magazine from cover to cover and especially enjoy the Editorial and Letters sec-

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tions. The comments in the Letters section (Feb. 15) was the only deterrent to my latest story ending in the round file.

Harvey Childers
2907 Driftwood Dr.
Shepherdsville, KY 40165

I must admit that I like some of my stories less than others, and some I find even embarrassing, but I've never deliberately thrown one away or torn it up. I think you're the first person I've encountered who went on hunger-strike to get more of my stuff. I'm touched.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors:

I have just finished reading John M. Ford's "Waiting for the Morning Bird" in the Nov. 81 issue of *IAsfm*. I have never written a letter to a magazine for any reason, but this one had to be written. Mr. Ford's story kicked me in the funny bone, scrambled a few brain cells, and then just formed a delicious lump in my stomach. I absolutely loved it.

I have entertained a few metaphors in my time but none have been as real and as much fun as Mr. Ford's. It is always incredible when you meet someone who seems to have exactly the same likes, dislikes, heroes, villains, etc. as yourself, and I would get along just great with the story's narrator.

Earl L. Augusta
Huntington, CT

It's always delightful when some particular story really hits home. One gets the feeling of "that alone is worth the price of the issue," and since the rest of the issue can't be worth nothing at all, you end up getting more than your money's worth—which is what we try to deliver.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Gregory Benford's article "Why is There So Little Science In Literature" in the February 15th issue makes a number of interesting points but gives, I believe, a somewhat misleading idea as to the number of science novels. *In Vivo; The Struggles of Albert Woods; Meeting at a Far Meridian; My Brother, My Enemy* and Mitchell Wilson's masterpiece, *Live with Lightning*, which was book clubbed in 1949 and paperbacked in the early fifties, spring readily to mind. Benford might enjoy it, since it deals with a physicist in the '30s of America. It is worth five Arrowsmiths and probably ten of Snow's *The Search*. There may be many others like the ones mentioned which are also not kept in print and thus become "lost" to people like Benford.

In many ways Benford's own *Timescape* is an example of why art and science are not meeting. Fermat's Last Theorem is mentioned in the book but does nothing to add to the plot, action, etc. It is just an interesting fact that in a hack writer would be called "padding." There are millions of such facts, many equally interesting, but the average reader's reaction is to say, "So what?" I cannot say such an attitude is wrong. What Benford

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did was not venal, but neither was it art.

I think I can safely say that most writers are strangers to the scientific life and certainly don't understand in a meaningful manner the complicated disciplines that are modern physics, chemistry, mathematics, etc. Even Benford does not know *all* of physics. He knows only his own specialties. Today it really has to be that way, because life and time are limited and knowledge is vast. I don't blame writers for not writing "science." There are other concerns besides art that bother them, such as successful commercial products that sell and enhance their reputations. Why write about them dull scientists in their stuffy laboratories and classrooms when the public wants to read about exotic people in even more exotic sexual escapades? People in future centuries, if they read the literature of the 20th century, will think that people spent 90% of their time traveling to and from beds or actually in bed.

Benford might well have broadened his question to ask why most workers are ignored by writers. One English professor once jokingly said to me that the last work of literature he remembered reading that dealt with a worker was about some cloth-weaver named Silas Marner.

Regards for your continued success.

Edward Wood
873 Tower Ave.
Hartford, CT 06112

In general, I don't encourage the use of the letter column for protracted discussions, but Ed makes some interesting points here, and I would welcome a few further comments on the subject.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov & Staff:

I have been a subscriber to your magazine for two years and have thoroughly enjoyed every issue. Actually, the subscription is in my wife's name and she threatens to cancel it whenever we disagree. Needless to say, I always give in. As soon as the Magazine arrives in the mail, I drop whatever else I may be reading at the time and read *IAsfm* from cover to cover. I try the puzzles and read all the poetry and puns. These are especially amusing to me as I have a very sick sense of humor.

Some of the notable stories you have featured in the last few months include Robert Silverberg's Majipoor series and Somtow Sucharitkul's Inquestor series. Rarely, in the two years I have been reading *IAsfm*, have I come across a story I did not like. Even so, once I have started reading, I usually finish a story. I just cannot leave things hanging.

I do wish you would answer one question that has me puzzled. Is *IAsfm* one month ahead of its time or does the publishing industry use a different calendar than us common folk? Why did I receive the March 15 issue on February 2? (Not that I am complaining, mind you.) Have you considered going into the predated newspaper business? Please explain the dating system, if any.

Sincerely,

Michael Aron
West Hartford, CT.

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Magazines are routinely dated according to the end of their expected stay on the newsstands rather than the beginning. That is to encourage the people who run the newsstands not to remove the magazine prematurely, and to prevent the readers from too soon deciding they have an old issue.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

This is the letter I have been meaning to write for a year. First, let me say that I have no strong feelings about your cover design. If not for the comments in the letters section, I would never have noticed the change. I am far more interested in the content of the magazine.

Secondly, *IAsfm* is not really a science fiction magazine. It is a correspondence course in creative writing, and is far better than any of my previous writing courses. Each issue contains a wealth of new styles and ideas, as well as instructive editorial comments.

Steve Hedlesky
Richmond, VA

Your attitude toward us is heartening, but our magazine is also intended to entertain, amuse, and uplift those readers who do not dream of becoming writers. Nor do we forget that those readers are likely to be a heavy majority.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov et al:

Thank you very much for bringing such a terrific magazine to all of us SF fans. *IAsfm* is great!

I am 13 years old and have been reading my father's science fiction magazines for years. I was suitably interested when I saw a SF publication with the Good Doctor's name on it. I've enjoyed it very much, but this is the first time I've gotten up the courage to write to you.

Some of my favorite works have been the Mallworld stories by Somtow Sucharitkul. Also excellent are the Majipoor series and the Improbable Bestiaries by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre. The Pshrinks tales of J. O. Jeppson are equally enjoyable.

Dr. Asimov, I was very excited to see a story with your name on it in the February issue. "Lest We Remember" was a fascinating story. Will you be writing more soon?

Laura Seiver
427 Rustwood Rd.
Baton Rouge, LA 70810

Only 13 and already you have excellent taste. I like to see that in a young woman. Well, I hope to write more short stories, especially if you promise to continue finding them fascinating. In fact, there will be a story by me in next month's issue.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Three hips and a hurrah! Finally someone has shed some light on the (enervating but enjoyable) life of the writer. Your past few editorials on writers and writing have been . . . what can I say . . . great, terrific, but mainly shockingly truthful. As a (teenage) writer, I found myself laughing exuberantly after reading your December '81

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editorial, "What Writers Go Through." I must be sadistic, for I was laughing at myself. You described (with a great use of imagery) what I and other writers go through every time we send out a story. However painful it is, you made it funny. You described sheer hell and made it funny!

Hopefully, those non-writers who read the editorials will take to heart what we writers go through to "give birth" to a publishable story, and will quit being such nitpicks when it comes to critiquing. My advice to them is try and write a few of their own SF stories, and see how tough it really is. It's not as easy as they'd like to think.

Jim Allen
Rte #3 Box 127
Birch Tree, MO 65438

It's truthful, because I've lived through it, and because I have an inconveniently accurate memory. Read the first volume of my autobiography and you'll see.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I want to tell you how much I enjoyed your editorial, "The Unforgivable Sin," in the February 15th issue of *IAsfm*. Enjoyed? I *revéled* in it!

I love words. Even when an unfamiliar word is understandable through context, I sometimes look it up anyway, because the clarity of the mental image brought by knowing the precise definition of that word is so much greater as to make the extra effort worthwhile.

Words chosen and set with care by the hand of a Master can cause my heart to sing, "Yes, yes, this is true!" or to realize that I am seeing the world/life in a way that I never saw it before. If nothing else, I can wallow in the sensuous pleasures of the worlds they conjure for me.

Just as there are people who can bring words to glorious life, so there are people (and they are being *published*!) who kill the words they so awkwardly attempt to use. The truly sad thing in these cases is that some of these people had what could have been a very interesting story or book if only they had known how to write it.

I understand well your disgust with writers who equate obscurity with deep analysis and throw in meaningless long words merely to impress. It has not been so long since I had the misfortune to type for such a person. I may not have understood communications equipment, but I knew when a sentence made no sense because it was unclear whether the verb was modifying noun A or noun B. Luckily, my sufferings were cut short when I made the mistake of taking the time to turn a nearly-unintelligible letter into what I'd hoped was a clear outline. When I naively asked for his approval (and if I had misinterpreted anything), he not only did not approve, he specifically asked my supervisor not to allow me to type anything of his again.

Ann Nichols
4864 Sioux Avenue
Sierra Vista, AZ 85635

It is Molière's opinion that "A learned fool is more foolish than an

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ignorant one," and you have discovered that, haven't you?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

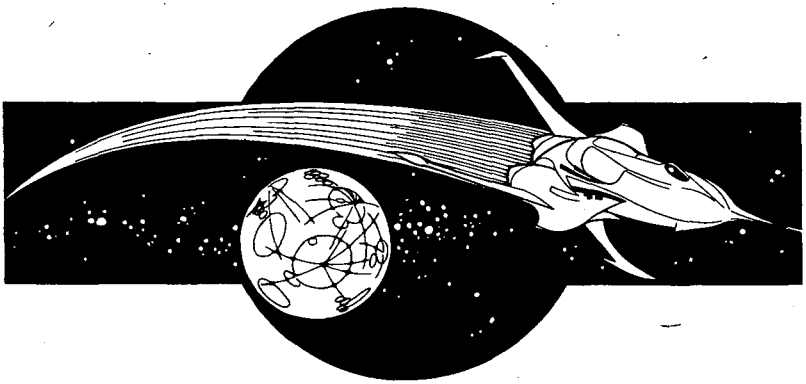
I read your editorial in the March issue with great satisfaction. It's all too easy at times to question the worth of what one does. You've inspired me to keep working, to keep trying.

I left an unsatisfying career with a large multinational corporation two years ago to begin *learning* to write science fiction. When people ask me what I do, I'm proud to say, "I write science fiction! What's your excuse?" Seriously, even a struggling beginner like me can appreciate being a member of the "family," even if more by intent and desire than by publication credits.

David R. Bedingfield
Anderson, SC

To be honest, my advice to young people who want to learn to write science fiction (or anything at all) always includes the remark, "—and don't quit your job."

—Isaac Asimov



NEXT ISSUE

The October 1982 issue of *IAsfm* promises to be an especially exciting one. We have a brand-new short story from Isaac Asimov himself; a "Viewpoint" article by Dr. Lewis Thomas, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Medusa and the Snail*; another SF-oriented crossword puzzle; fiction by Robert F. Young, Jack C. Haldeman II, Sharon Webb, and Steve Perry and George Florance-Guthridge, along with many other favorites. On sale August 31.

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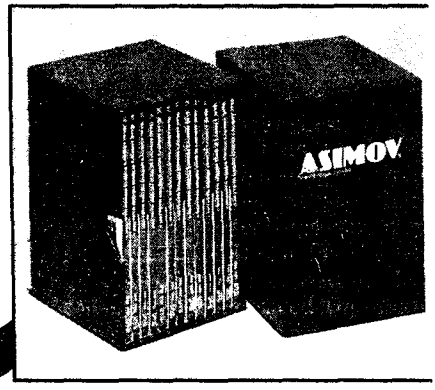

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$1.20 each additional word
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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

If you haven't mailed your membership to the Chicago WorldCon by now, you'll have to join at the door. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. When phoning cons, identify yourself and reason for calling right away. Look for me as Filthy Pierre at cons.

AUGUST, 1982

6-8—**Summer Media Fest.** For info, write: **10019 Greenbelt Rd, Seabrook MD 20706.** Or phone **(301) 794-6151** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Rosslyn VA (near Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: (none announced). Successor to the Star Trek August Party, with the same no-guests policy to keep it a strictly fannish con.

13-15—**ConGeneric. (503) 236-1366.** Portland OR. Marta ("Journey") Randall, John ("Persistence of Vision") Varley, N. Hartman, F. M. Busby, S. B. Bieler, S. Perry, M. K. Wren, G. V. Troyer.

13-16—**MythCon.** Chapman College, Orange (near Los Angeles) CA. The 13th annual Mythopoeic Society con for fans of high fantasy (Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, etc.). Marion Zimmer (Darkover) Bradley, Katherine (Deryni) Kurtz, artist Tim Kirk, K. Lindskoog. Note the correct ending date.

20-22—**MidSouthCon, Box 12534, Memphis TN 38112.** Quality Inn Riverview. A low-key relaxacon here.

SEPTEMBER, 1982

2-6—**ChiCon IV.** Hyatt Regency Hotel, Chicago, IL. A. Bertram (Rim Worlds) Chandler, Kelly Freas, Lee Hoffman. The 1982 WorldCon. Join at the door for upwards of $50 if you haven't joined already.

11-12—**ValleyCon, c/o Steen, Box 932, Moorhead MN 56560.** At the Hawaiian Inn. No more info on hand.

24-26—**BabelCon, c/o Marshall, 1160 36th SW, Wyoming, MI 49509.** Grand Rapids MI. Costume cantina.

24-26—**URCon, Box 6647, Rochester NY 14627.** The University of Rochester SF Society's annual affair.

24-26—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Marion Zimmer (Darkover) Bradley, Wendy (Elfquest) Pini, fan Steve Forty. Masquerade, Jacuzzi party, Sunday brunch, Lensman awards. Sounds relaxed.

OCTOBER, 1982

1-3—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Northside High School, Roanoke VA. Philip (William Tenn) Klass, artist Kelly Freas, M. A. Foster, Rudy ("Software") Rucker, Ralph Roberts, Paul Dellinger, Douglas Chaffee, Phil Hawkins. Masquerade, cantina, workshops.

1-3—**ArmadilloCon, c/o Taylor, Box 9612 NW Sta., Austin TX 78766.** Geo. Aleo Effinger, Ed Bryant, G. R. R. ("Windhaven") Martin, Howard ("Ugly Chickens") Waldrop, Chad Oliver, Leigh Kennedy.

8-10—**LastCon, Box 13-002, Albany NY 12212.** W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Lee (Shree) Killough, Leslie Turek.

8-10—**StarCon, Box 3096, Lubbock TX 79452.** Jack (Humanoids) Williamson, Bob Verdeman, G. Proctor.

9-11—**OctoCon, c/o Spellbinders, Box 1824, Santa Rosa CA.** Roger (Amber) Zelazny, Larry ("Oath of Fealty") Niven, Poul (Polesotechnic) Anderson, Ralph McQuarrie. Big Northern California con.

SEPTEMBER, 1983

1-5—**ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203.** John (Zanzibar) Brunner, D. Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Go to smaller cons if you can to prepare for the WorldCons.

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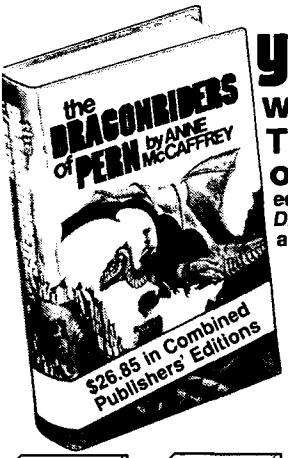

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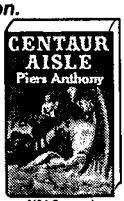

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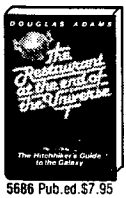

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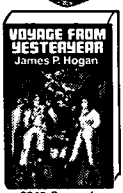

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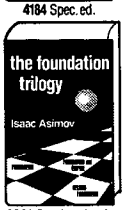

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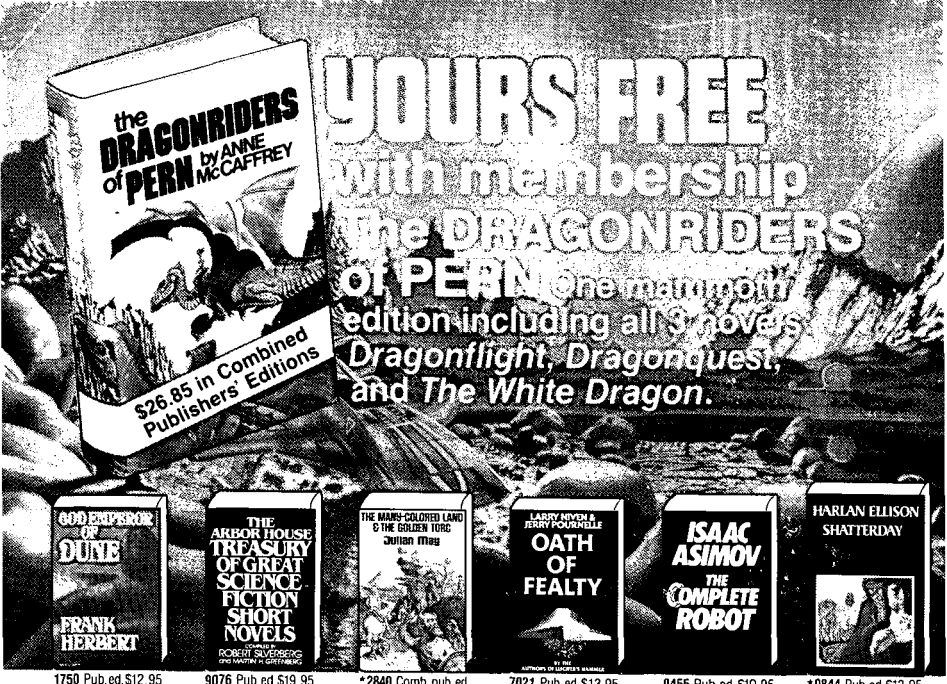
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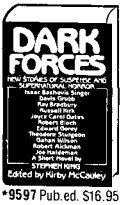

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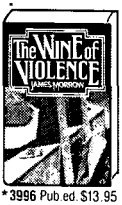

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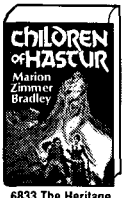

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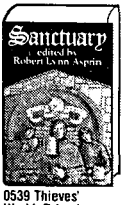

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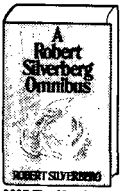

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